

CALIGULA by William Howard

1.

The bedroom was fairly small, as was common in the houses of wealthy Romans. There were no windows—air and light reached the room from the atrium, the central courtyard around which the house was built and which was open to the sky. There were indications of affluence, nevertheless. Paintings, colorful and masterfully done, covered the walls. The wooden bed frame was inlaid with ivory and tortoise-shell. The twin lamps that stood on the room's single chest were of wrought-silver.

The young man on the bed was Gaius Caesar Germanicus, known as Caligula, which meant Little Boots. Caligula was slightly built. His hair was thinning in front, thick in back. Normally, his face was pleasant, benign. But now his expression was beginning to contort and small beads of perspiration were formed on his brow, revealing that a nightmare, like some particularly hideous monster, was slowly creeping up out of the dark depths of his subconscious mind to confront him with its ugliness.

Beside Caligula on the bed was his sister, Drusilla, a few years his elder. The thin sheet that covered the two showed Drusilla—naked, as was her brother—to be a woman of considerable physical attractiveness. Her breasts, though in repose, stood firmly erect. She was slim-hipped and lithely slender. There was strength—a kind of stoic dignity—as well as beauty to her face. She had the look of a sleeping goddess.

Caligula's breathing became labored. The beads of perspiration grew into globules and, dislodged by their own weight, trickled down his face. The monster-night mare was emerging from the darkness. A familiar and terrifying scene was taking shape in Caligula's mind. Already he could hear the sounds that accompanied it. There was the ritualistic chanting of the great mass of mourners; the cacophony of a funeral dirge played on hollow-voiced horns, clanging cymbals and reedy-toned pipes; and, startlingly, the half-mad shrieks, wails and moans of the totally grief-stricken.

Against a backdrop of infinite blackness, Caligula saw himself as a child. He was dressed as a Roman soldier, wearing the child-size half-boots that his father, Germanicus, had had fashioned for him. In the vision, Caligula was performing a Roman war dance, stomping savagely, gesturing pugnaciously. There was a grim doggedness about his performance, as if he had learned the dance by rote and had only a tenuous understanding of its meaning, but was determined nonetheless to please his audience.

The blackness began to fade. In the grayness that replaced it, Caligula saw the Mausoleum of Augustus, a circular marble structure that was topped by a cone of earth and planted with Cypress trees. The mourners came into view, a ragged line of men and women who were carrying torches and chanting and moaning. In the wavering firelight they looked to Caligula the child like ogres, their bodies horribly misshapen, their faces grotesque.

He saw himself again, still the child, still dancing. He was on a dais along with his mother, Antonia, and his two brothers and three sisters. Mourners reached out to him, trying to touch him. Some tried to kiss his little boots. But guards pushed them back. Seemingly oblivious to this show of affection and homage toward her son, Antonia remained aloof, stern-visaged and dry-eyed. Only Drusilla among the family members took note of the attention being paid to him, smiling dotingly.

The mourners were gathering around the mausoleum. Men who were shrouded in heavy cloaks and wearing masks began to appear, passing by the dais. The masks were terrifying. They

represented ancestors, real and legendary, of the imperial family. And, since many of the actual family members had died by violent means, the masks portrayed the agony of their passing.

The first man wore a mask of a beautiful woman. A priest, standing below the dais, began chanting the identities of the imperial forebears. "The goddess Venus," he intoned, "divine ancestress of the house of Caesar."

Wails rose from the mourners.

The child Caligula danced on.

A man wearing the death mask of Julius Caesar approached. The features of the mask were twisted hideously in anguish, showing the great Caesar as he looked at the moment when he was stabbed to death in the Senate.

"Julius Caesar, now a god," the priest chanted.

The mourners wept and wailed.

The war dance of the child Caligula had lost momentum, slowing. Now it stopped. He was realizing the import of the ceremony. These masks with the anguished features represented Caesars who had been murdered. And, like them, he too was a Caesar. As the parade of men masquerading as his ancestors continued past the dais, Caligula's expression froze with horror.

Drusilla, sensing her brother's terror, rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. But instantly Antonia, with a swift, testy gesture, struck the hand away. For a second, she stared coldly at her son, telling him with her look that he must stand alone, then she faced forward once more, aloof again.

Fortunately for the child Caligula there was a momentary respite from the horror. The mask that was passing the dais was serene, the face of a very old man who had apparently died a natural death and who had been happy to go.

"Augustus Caesar," the priest intoned, "now a god."

Then the relief ended.

A litter, borne by eight men, came into view, approaching the dais. Aboard the litter was an urn.

"Germanicus..." the priest chanted.

The mourners wailed and wept, their sorrow unquellable.

The child Caligula realized that the urn contained the ashes of his father.

A lone, disembodied voice rose above the agonized sounds of wailing and weeping. "Who killed Germanicus?"

As the litter moved on, the child Caligula became aware of a tall, cloaked, eerie figure of a man marching behind it. At the same moment, the man detoured, turning toward the dais.

Although his face was hooded by his mourning robes, the man was recognized instantly by the mourners. His name began to be whispered through the crowd.

"Tiberius... Tiberius... Tiberius..."

Antonia stiffened.

Her children, save for Caligula, drew back, shrinking from the hooded figure.

Caligula remained rooted. Not out of bravery, however, but because he was paralyzed with fear.

Reaching the dais, Tiberius pushed back the hood, revealing his face to Caligula. It was a haggard face, with deep-set eyes and the skin discolored and blotched with the scales and drying crusts of acute eczema. To the child Caligula the face looked even more repulsive than it actually was. It had the fangs and slobbering mouth of a rabid wolf. And the skin was a leper's, a mass of scales, seeping with mucous discharges.

Caligula shrieked.

Tiberius reached out to him.

It seemed to the child Caligula that he and Tiberius had become suspended in time. He continued to shriek— throat-shredding scream after throat-shredding scream— while, at the same time, Tiberius continued to reach to ward him, but never quite touched him. He sensed that this game that they were playing—him screaming; Tiberius reaching but never touching- -was going to go on forever, into eternity.

But suddenly, Caligula was no longer a child. He was a young man. Tiberius, the mourners, the Mausoleum of Augustus had all disappeared. He was in the arms of his sister Drusilla. She was holding him close, speaking to him soothingly. He recognized the furnishings of his bedroom; the chest, the lamps of wrought-silver. Then he heard his own voice, no longer shrieking, simply saying words.

“He’s going to kill me...”

Drusilla crooned softly in reply. “No...no... you’re safe. You’re with me.”

Caligula clung to her desperately, feeling the smooth roundness of a breast against his cheek. His entire body was awash in sweat. Bits and pieces of the nightmare kept skipping across his mind...the masks, the features contorted in agony...the face of Tiberius, crusty and slimy... He forced himself to open his eyes and keep them open, denying the nightmare the darkness it needed to become whole again.

“You’re safe...” Drusilla repeated, purring, petting him lovingly.

At last, he was wide awake. Disengaging himself from his sister’s arms, he lay back on the bed and stared up at the coiling. The feeling of fear was subsiding. His breathing was almost normal. Turning his eyes to Drusilla, he smiled faintly to let her know that the worst of the ordeal had passed. Then, grinning suddenly, he focused on her bare breasts.

“Safe?” he said. “What makes you think I’m safe when I’m with you?”

“You’re not,” she answered matter-of-factly. With a corner of the sheet, she began dabbing at the perspiration on her brother’s brow. “Was it the same dream?” she asked.

Caligula sighed drearily, nodding. “I’m at my father’s funeral...”

“And the Emperor starts to pick you up...”

Caligula shuddered at the memory.

“But then what happens?” Drusilla asked.

“I wake up. Just before Tiberius kills me, the way he killed—”

Drusilla quickly touched a finger to his lips, silencing him. She gestured toward a wall, behind which, as they had known for quite a while, one of their servants spent each night in the next room, listening, spying on them.

Reminded of the presence of the spy, Caligula became fearful again. Huddling close to his sister, he drew her down beside him, then embraced her tightly, more like a child in fright than a young man in heat. Drusilla, sympathetic, held her brother in the same fierce manner, and protectively rather than ardently. Then, clinging to each other, they whispered.

“He killed our father,” Caligula said, speaking into the softness of Drusilla’s dark hair. “Our mother. Our brothers.”

He was still talking too loudly. “Sh-sh-sh—” she warned.

“I don’t want to die,” Caligula said, his voice trembling.

“You won’t die,” his sister told him. “You can’t. You’re his heir. There’s no one else.”

Somewhat reassured, Caligula frowned thoughtfully, easing his hold on Drusilla.

“There’s the boy,” he said.

“Gemellus is too young,” she replied. “And Tiberius is too old.” She pressed her lips to his ear and whispered very softly. “You will be Emperor...soon...”

That notion delighted Caligula. Impishly, he whispered back to her in the same silky-soft way. “And you will be queen, wife, consort...”

Drusilla wriggled free of the embrace. “I’m your sister. Remember?” she said, speaking normally once more. Turning away from him, she picked up a comb from the side table and, half reclining, began combing out her hair.

Caligula watched her in silence for a few moments, smiling mischievously. Then, “The Pharaohs of Egypt *always* married their sisters,” he said.

“Well, we’re not Egyptians, I’m happy to say,” Drusilla responded. “We are proper Romans.”

“Not so proper...”

Caligula’s sister glanced at him sideways, as if she were not quite sure what he had on his mind and she was at tempting to read his thoughts. At the same instant, Caligula made his thinking perfectly clear. Looping an arm around her waist, he pulled her down beside him again. The comb went flying. Rolling over, Caligula positioned himself between his sister’s slender thighs and, giggling, began simulating intercourse.

Drusilla shoved at him—irked, not angry. “Stop it! Don’t be such a child!”

He had no intention of giving up the game so easily, however. Keeping his sister pinned down, he nuzzled her playfully, continuing to thrust himself forward into the tight crevice that was formed by her resisting thighs. Drusilla’s reaction to this adolescent horse play was increasing annoyance, which she expressed with vigorous shoves against his chest and grumbled protestations. That is, until at last the cumulative effect of the nuzzling and thrusting began to erode her determination to resist. At that point, she gradually ceased trying to dislodge her brother from between her legs. Soon, she was holding him close instead of trying to push him away, and her thighs had opened fully to him.

By then, Caligula was no longer merely playing at the game. It had ceased to be a boy’s sport; it was now a man’s work. Intercourse had become a goal to be achieved at any cost. The childish nuzzlings became feverish kisses pressed against his sister’s hair, her eyelids, her throat. And Drusilla responded with passionate murmurings and sensuous writhing that stoked his now blazing desire for her to an ever hotter heat. The element of kinship that was supposed to keep them apart was proving to be dismayingly feeble in the test against carnal instinct.

“Love...” Caligula whispered.

Her reply was an echo. “Love...”

But love—or what passed for it—would have to wait for another time.

From beyond the room came the clanking sounds made by armed men.

The activity on the bed ceased at once. Still locked in the embrace, Caligula and Drusilla listened. Again the sound of light armor was heard. Then came the voice of the sentry stationed at the entrance to the atrium.

“Password?”

“Justice,” was the reply. Caligula recognized the bear-like voice as belonging to the captain of the imperial guard.

Instantly, the raging fire in Caligula became a sodden bed of dead coals. Scrambling to his feet, he reached for a robe.

“Pass,” the sentry said.

“Who’s that?” Drusilla asked.

“Macro,” Caligula replied sharply. Having donned the robe, he was now concealing a dagger within its folds.

Drusilla bounded from the bed. As she dressed, slipping into a thin shift, a servant spoke from the other side of the door.

"Prince Caligula," the servant said. "The captain of the imperial guard..." Caligula motioned to his sister, sending her to the door. At the same time, he responded to the servant. "Come in."

Drusilla unlatched the door. Pulling it open, she concealed herself behind it.

Macro entered the bedroom. He was big, burly and middle-aged, the prototype, in looks, of the professional Roman soldier or high rank. There was something more to him in manner, however; exquisiteness about the way he moved, cunningness to his expression, that suggested that he would be as much at ease at court as on the battle field. Inside the doorway, he saluted.

Caligula nodded diffidently in response. At the same time, no longer wary, he put aside the dagger.

"I'm not interrupting...am I?" Macro asked. He was looking about the room, perplexed. Clearly, he had been informed that Caligula was not alone. Yet, there was no one else in sight.

"Only my dreams," Caligula replied, smiling, faintly amused by Macro's puzzlement.

Macro moved on into the room. "Happy dreams?"

"Mmmmm..." Caligula responded noncommittally. He looked closely at Macro. "News from Capri?"

"Yes. Just arrived. He commands you to wait upon him." The words caused Caligula to wince painfully. A shudder passed through his body. The "he" referred to by the captain of the guard was Tiberius, the Emperor.

Macro pretended not to notice the effect that his news had had on the younger man. "There's a ship waiting in the Tiber," he said casually. "We leave at first light."

"What—" Caligula was dry-mouthed. "What does he want?"

"A last look at you, I suppose," Macro replied. "He is seventy-seven," he said pointedly.

Caligula's response was automatic. "May he live forever." Then, grudgingly, he muttered, "And he will, too."

There was a second of silence. Both men seemed to be waiting for the other to speak. They were obviously wary about putting their thoughts into words. Finally, Macro took the initiative.

"Watch out for Nerva," he said tensely to Caligula. "He is our enemy." Caligula nodded. "I know," he said grimly.

"Ennia..." Macro began. His tone had softened.

"Ennia, yes," Caligula replied. There was warmth to his manner now; but it was suspect. "How is she?"

"In love..."

"In hell then, as the poets say," Caligula replied lightly.

"Shall I tell her to come to you...here?" Macro asked.

Caligula glanced toward the door that concealed his sister. "No...no, no," he said quickly to Macro. "I'll go to her." He motioned toward the open doorway. "We'll go together."

As Macro preceded him from the room, Caligula paused for an instant at the door. Drusilla peeked out from behind it. They exchanged fleeting smiles and a touch of hands, then Caligula moved on, following the captain of the guard into the atrium. The door closed slowly and quietly behind him.

Leaving the atrium, Caligula and Macro entered a long corridor that was lighted by torches that were set at intervals in the walls. The illumination was uneven; spots of orange brightness, then stretches of dark shadows. The expressions on the faces of the two men were set,

tight-lipped, giving the impression that their relationship was an alliance of mutual convenience rather than respect or congeniality.

“We’ve nothing to fear,” Macro said, keeping his voice low.

Caligula was dubious. “With Tiberius there is always *something* to fear,” he replied.

At the exit they were met by a pair of guards.

“Halt! The password?” a guard demanded.

“Justice,” Macro responded.

The guard stepped back. “Pass.”

Outside the house the contingent of soldiers that had accompanied Macro on his mission were waiting. They fell in behind Caligula and Macro as the two men set out along the dark street.

“As long as I command the guard, you are safe,” Macro told Caligula.

Caligula glanced at him sideways, a hint of doubt in his expression. “Your loyalty, Macro, is...is...”

“At your service,” Macro said helpfully. He smiled once more. “As is Ennia, my wife,” he added.

“Who will become—if I live—my wife.”

“And Empress of Rome.”

Caligula took in a deep breath. “And Empress of Rome,” he agreed, releasing the words along with the breath. Then the look of worry returned to his face. “If I get back from Capri alive,” he said.

2.

By ship, Caligula and Macro traveled southward along the coast to the Sorrentine peninsula, the stubby finger of land that formed the southern shore of the Bay of Naples. From there, across open water, they sailed the short distance to the island of Capri, which was home to the Emperor Tiberius, and, as a consequence of his presence there, the *de facto* seat of government for the empire.

Capri was a paradise, the climate temperate, the vegetation lush. And the villa of Tiberius, set on a high, rocky cliff that faced the sea—and, beyond, the azure waters of the bay of Naples—was a palace. There was an aura of absolute isolation from reality about the island and the villa, as if they were a figment of some romantic poet’s dream of the Edenic garden, given substance.

Leaving Macro on board the ship, Caligula set out alone up the tree-lined path to the villa. His mood was glum. There was danger in being anywhere near Tiberius, who had unlimited power—and a reputation for using it capriciously. For Caligula, the Emperor’s heir, the danger was especially acute. The old man was capable of deciding, on pure whim, that he could insure the continuance of his own life by simply eliminating the one who would follow him to power if he were dead. His actions were totally unpredictable.

Nearing the villa, Caligula saw an elderly man standing in the shade of a particularly large tree, watching him approach, apparently waiting for him. He recognized the man immediately. He was Nerva, a senator, the man whom Macro had referred to as his and Caligula’s enemy. By a devilish trick of nature, Nerva, an honorable and noble man, had the look of a scoundrel. His eyes were beady. His other facial features were sharp, pointed, fox-like. Only in his actions were his virtues of wisdom, honesty and empathy evident.

Caligula and Nerva met on the path, exchanged greetings, then walked on together toward the villa, with Caligula now adapting his stride to the older man's slower pace. The subject they chose to discuss was Tiberius.

"Ten years is a long time for an emperor to be hidden away," Nerva said, gesturing widely, taking in the entire island.

"But if he's happy here..." Caligula replied.

Nerva made a face of aggravation. "*I* shall be happier," he said, "when he is back at Rome where he belongs." The two men entered the villa and began a walk down a long corridor that passed through handsome courtyards and luxuriant gardens.

"Tell us, Nerva: how is he?" Caligula asked cautiously.

"Old. Like me." "I mean...how is...?"

"His mood?"

"Yes."

"Like the weather," Nerva said sourly.

From a courtyard, Caligula peered upward toward the sky. "The weather is good... today."

"But the season is still winter," Nerva said cryptically. He halted, and, touching Caligula's arm, stopped him. His expression was sorrowful. "I have heard that in the last month seven of my colleagues in the Senate have been put to death," he said. "For treason."

"Nine, actually," Caligula told him, smiling ever so slightly at the look of grief on the old man's face. "And five of them cheated. They killed themselves. That was inconsiderate. Don't you agree, Nerva?"

"They were good men."

Caligula spoke measuredly, carefully monitoring Nerva's expression. "If they were good men, why did my beloved grandfather, their Emperor—*and your friend*—find them guilty?"

Nerva stared at him levelly for a second, then replied dryly, "You have a gift for logic, Prince."

As they moved on, Caligula's smile became more mischievous and the older man's expression increasingly melancholy.

A short distance further on, they came to a squad of soldiers, whose commander, Chaerea, anticipating the arrival of the Prince and the Senator, had called them to attention. Caligula observed the men interestedly as he and Nerva made their way along the line. Nerva, preoccupied with his gloomy thoughts, paid them no attention at all. Then abruptly, Caligula halted in front of one of the soldiers. He was a tall, sturdy young man. But his eyes were oddly out of focus. He was drunk.

"You!" Caligula snapped at the soldier.

"Sir?" He was unable to manage even that single word without slurring it.

"Step forward," Caligula commanded. Unsteadily, the soldier advanced a single pace.

"Drunk!" Caligula said disgustedly.

"Oh, no, Lord!" the man protested. He was still having difficulty with his speech. But not as much now, for fear was beginning to sober him.

Chaerea, the commander, came hurrying up, looking flustered. "Relieve this man," Caligula said to him.

"Yes, Prince," Chaerea replied obsequiously. Caligula was about to say more. But at that moment he was distracted by sounds of splashing coming from the direction of the pool. A second later, he heard a voice that he recognized as the Emperor's. Immediately, the matter of the drunken soldier ceased to be of interest to him. As he proceeded, accompanied once more by

Nerva, his manner underwent an acute change. No longer was he the domineering Prince. He was now merely the uncertain young man again.

Puzzlingly, Tiberius was nowhere in sight as they approached the pool. Caligula guessed that he had gone into the grotto, a cavern cut by nature out of a high limestone cliff. But that conjecture proved wrong. As he and Nerva reached the edge of the pool, they saw what appeared to be a sea monster beneath the surface of the water. Then the monster emerged, revealing itself to be the Emperor.

Tiberius stood erect, the crystal clear water of the natural pool almost up to his shoulders. He was wearing a tunic, a thin, sleeveless garment that clung to him above the water line and floated freely, like a wide skirt, below the surface. Caligula was stunned by how much the Emperor had aged since he had seen him last. His flesh sagged in folds. The eczema had deadened the skin on his face, giving it the look of a field of burned out lava, pocked and ashen.

But his spirit, apparently, was still very much alive. “Caligula!” he called out cheerily, wading toward the edge of the pool.

“Lord... beloved grandfather... Great Caesar!” Caligula responded avidly. He was the child again, eager to please.

Reaching the edge of the pool, Tiberius extended a hand. And Caligula, as was expected of him, kissed it slavishly. At the same moment, he saw that the Emperor was not alone in the pool. What seemed to be a pair of human fish was swimming about his legs. One suddenly vanished beneath the old man’s tunic.

“Do your dance, boy,” Tiberius ordered, addressing Caligula.

“My dance?”

“Yes. The one you were famous for. When you were the darling of your father’s troops. Come on, Little Boots!” He began clapping his hands spiritedly. “Dance. Dance. Dance.”

Half-heartedly, Caligula began the stomping and gesturing of the war dance. As he went through the motions, he watched the Emperor speculatively, wondering if time had dealt as severely with his mind as it had with his body. He found no glaring evidence of senility in the old man’s countenance, however.

The two human fish suddenly surfaced. They were children, a boy and a girl, both adolescents, both naked.

“My minnows!” Tiberius cried out fondly. Nerva made a face of weary dismay.

Motioning exuberantly, Tiberius called out again. “All right! Come on, the rest of you!”

A dozen-or-so naked prepubescent boys and girls came scurrying from the grotto and out from behind bushes. Laughing and giggling, they dove and leaped into the pool and clustered around the Emperor. Tiberius was elated.

“A shoal of minnows! Oh, my lovely little fish!” Diving below the surface of the water, then up under his tunic, the children began playing with his legs and genitals.

It was too much for Nerva. He rolled his eyes skyward in disgust. Caligula, meanwhile, danced on—mechanically, like a windup toy that was running down.

“Caesar,” Nerva said, “may I present the documents for your signature?”

Tiberius beamed upon him. “Ah, good old friend. Yes. Of course. Then—later—I want you to talk wisdom to the Prince...as you do to me.”

Nerva turned away, departing, clearly relieved to be free to go. “Your arm,” Tiberius commanded, speaking to Caligula once more.

At last, Caligula was able to end the dance. Standing at the edge of the pool, he extended a hand to the Emperor, then pulled him from the water. Tiberius came out like a whale, puffing, shedding water. He took a moment to regain his breath, then sat down at the rim of the pool,

dangling his legs over the edge. At his signal, two of the children, a boy and a girl, joined him, nestling beside him.

"All right, little fish," Tiberius called out to the other children. "Back to your aquarium!" Laughing and giggling again, they scrambled from the pool, splashing, and ran off, disappearing into the grotto and beyond the bushes in the surrounding gardens. When they were gone, Tiberius focused his attention on the two children whom he had kept with him, caressing them, stroking them adoringly, as if they were pet animals. He seemed to have forgotten that Caligula was still present.

Caligula shifted his stance, making a slight sound. The Emperor became aware of him once more. "Sit down, Caligula," he said. Warily, Caligula seated himself at the edge of the pool. Like Tiberius, he dangled his feet in the water.

They sat in silence, the Emperor preoccupied with petting the children, Caligula knowing better than to speak without permission. A slave appeared, carrying a pitcher and a beaker. He poured wine for the Emperor, but offered none to Caligula. Tiberius drank deeply from the beaker, spilling wine down the front of his wet tunic. Caligula looked away, pretending not to see this *gaucherie*.

"Do you love me?" Tiberius asked abruptly.

Caligula was caught off-guard. "Wha. . .why.. I... but, Lord, yes. I mean you are..."

"You ought to," Tiberius told him sourly. "I've kept you alive. Against everyone's advice," he added. He turned his eyes to Caligula, looking at him piercingly. "Why do you say such terrible things about me?"

"I don't!" Caligula replied, terrified. "Caesar. Really. Ever."

"I hear that you often pray for my death."

"By Heaven, I swear—"

But Tiberius' attention was on the children again. Hugging the boy, he tickled the child's genitals. The boy shivered ecstatically. And the girl, watching, giggled.

"Anyway, my little fish are fond of me," Tiberius said. "Aren't you?" he asked them.

"Yes, kind uncle..." the boy replied.

"They call me uncle," Tiberius said, delighted. "They *are* sweet, aren't they? So young. So unspoiled."

Caligula, realizing that the old man was not really addressing him but speaking to himself, kept silent. Tiberius now concentrated his interest on the girl, fondling her intimately. She wriggled deliciously at his touch.

"I do my best to protect their innocence," Tiberius said. "It is the least I can do in this foul world." Suddenly, apparently tired of the sport, he dumped the two children into the pool. "Off with you!"

They went splashing away, then vanished into the grotto. "I am old," Tiberius said drearily.

"But you are vigorous and strong..." Caligula said, trying to sound encouraging. Tiberius ignored the comment. "Of all my family," he said, "only you and the child Gemellus are left. All the others..." He shook his head sadly. "Struck down. By fate." He faced Caligula, looking at him evenly. "And it's fate that rules us," he told him. "Not any god or gods."

"I know, Caesar..." Caligula agreed.

"I wish you did," Tiberius said, his tone acid again. "But you don't. You worship Isis. And the worship of Isis," he said pointedly, "is against the law and punishable by death."

"No," Caligula protested. "No...I don't...please believe me..."

Tiberius faced away from him, sighing forlornly. “You are young. You are stupid. I am lenient.” He stared down at the water for a moment, silent and motionless, then, stirring again, he shifted his weight and said, “Help me up.”

Caligula leaped to his feet. After a great deal of pulling and hauling he got the old man out of the water. Standing erect, Tiberius towered over Caligula.

“Little Boots...just look at you,” the Emperor said, bemused, peering down at him. “Yes, Caesar?”

Tiberius shook his head in dismay. “I am nursing a viper in Rome’s bosom,” he said, murmuring the words.

Caligula, who had not quite been able to make out what the old man had said, started to ask him to repeat the statement. But then he changed his mind. The look of misgiving on the Emperor’s face told him that he would be wise to let the matter drop.

As they set out, making their way through the garden that surrounded the pool, Tiberius asked for the latest gossip from Rome. Caligula told him what he assumed he wanted to hear, stories of illicit love affairs between men and women and women and women and men and men of high rank, most of the tales made up on the spur of the moment. Then Tiberius asked Caligula—slyly and barely managing to conceal a snigger—if his sister Drusilla were treating him well. Replying, stammering in confusion, Caligula was vague. He suspected that the spy’s report on the activities in his bedroom had reached Capri before him.

Fortunately for Caligula an opportunity arose at that moment for him to distract the Emperor from the subject of gossip. They were approaching the squad of soldiers that were commanded by Chaerea. Caligula seized on the chance to improve on the image of himself in the eyes of Tiberius.

“One of the sentries was drunk—on duty,” he advised the emperor.

Tiberius halted, scowling. “Oh?”

“I relieved him,” Caligula reported. “I hope I did the right thing.”

Tiberius growled angrily at the idea of one of his personal guards being intoxicated while on duty, indicating that Caligula had indeed taken the correct action. He then turned in the direction of Chaerea, who was responsible for his safety.

“Bring me the drunken clod!” he roared at the commander. Chaerea dispatched an officer and a soldier immediately. Moments later, they returned with the sentry in whom Caligula had detected drunkenness. The man was somewhat more sober now. The signs of his overindulgence were still visible, however. There was a slight tremble to his hands; his eyes were bloodshot.

Tiberius fixed him with a menacing glare. “Drunk on duty...”

“No, Caesar,” the man replied, his entire body shaking now; not from the hangover but from fear. “Lord. I wasn’t. Not really.”

Tiberius adjusted his expression, softening it a bit. “But you *did* have a cup or two of wine...” he suggested.

“Well, yes, Caesar. But no more,” the man assured him. “A celebration.”

The Emperor’s look now became benign, curiously questioning. “What?”

“My first child,” the sentry explained. “My first child was born, Caesar.”

“Oh? A boy or girl?”

“A boy, Caesar.”

“Well!” Tiberius said, beaming. “That is cause for celebration.” Turning away from the man, he clapped his hands loudly. “Wine!”

A pair of male servants came hurrying up, carrying a flagon and cups. At Tiberius' direction, they placed them on a nearby table. The Emperor faced the sentry again. "Drink, my son," he said paternally. "Celebrate."

The man hesitated, wary. "But...on duty...like this?" he asked.

"You have our leave," Tiberius told him smoothly. Reluctantly, but realizing that the granting of per mission was really an order, the sentry went to the table. He poured himself a cup of Wine, then, hands trembling violently, drank.

"And another," Tiberius said, as the sentry started to put the empty cup down. Again, the man hesitated.

Stepping to the table, Tiberius picked up the flagon and filled the cup with wine. Having no other reasonable choice, the sentry drank once more. Then, peering at the Emperor over the rim of the empty cup, he waited fearfully for the next order.

Tiberius, turning away from him, addressed Chaerea. "See that our good wine is not wasted," he said. "Do you understand?"

Chaerea nodded vigorously. "Yes, Lord." He then relayed the command to a junior officer, a captain. "See to it!" he ordered.

As Tiberius withdrew a few steps, rejoining Caligula, the captain strode up to the sentry and addressed him sharply. "The lacing to your boot. Quick!"

Befuddled, the man bent down and fumblingly removed the leather cord from one of his boots. Then, standing again, he hand it over to the captain. The captain lifted the skirt of the sentry's tunic and tucked it in around his belt. Next, he reached into the man's breech-clout and pulled out his genitals. The sentry's expression became panic-stricken. But he did not move.

Caligula glanced surreptitiously at Tiberius. He saw that the Emperor was still smiling benignly. So he adopted the look as his own.

Defly, taking his time at the task, the captain made a noose of the boot-lacing. Then, gently, he fitted the loop around the man's penis. Pausing for a second, the captain peered straight into the sentry's eyes—his own eyes transmitting a final look of com passion—then he yanked the noose tight. The sentry shrieked, falling back, grabbing frantically at his crotch. But he was immediately grasped by two other soldiers and dragged to the chair that stood beside the table. There, held in the seat, his arms were bound be hind his back.

"Give him more to drink, Tiberius said to the captain over the mad screaming of the sentry. Then, his fatherly smile still in place, he addressed the man directly. "After all," he said, "this is a day you'll never forget. Will you, lad?"

The sentry's reply was a shriek of supreme agony— which suddenly became a strangling gurgle, as the soldiers began sloshing more wine down his throat.

3.

Leaving the sounds of the sentry's choking cries be hind, Caligula and Tiberius strolled leisurely on, going deeper into the maze of gardens. The scene that surrounded them, with its cool woods, lush undergrowth and craggy grottos was much like a painting of some idealized sylvan retreat. It was not conducive to unpleasant thoughts. It was not long, therefore, before the plight of the soldier was dismissed from their minds. As for Tiberius, his thinking focused on himself. "How will they receive me in Rome?" he asked Caligula.

"With joy..." Caligula assured him.

"They ought," the Emperor said complacently. "I have done my best for my people. I swear that I have." Tiberius paused, peering into a grotto that was occupied by a trio of

adolescents, two girls and a boy. The young boy was made up as a satyr, with horns, tail and cloven hooves. The girls were supposed to be nymphs. At the appearance of the Emperor, the three quickly posed, pretending to be statues.

“Lovely, aren’t they?” Tiberius said, smiling bliss fully.

“Yes, Caesar,” Caligula replied appreciatively. “Are they new?”

“The satyr is from Illyria,” Tiberius replied, entering the grotto. Moving among the children, viewing them as if they really were works of art, he began stroking their bodies. “The nymphs from...ah...”

“Britain, Lord,” one of the adolescent girls reminded him, speaking in a breathy whisper.

The Emperor was delighted by this response. “Speaking statues!” he said.

“The best kind,” Caligula replied. He touched the buttocks of one of the nymphs—delicately and hesitantly, acutely conscious of the fact that the child was the Emperor’s property.

“You prefer nymphs to satyrs?” Tiberius asked, curious.

“I like both,” Caligula answered.

Tiberius nodded, agreeing to the wisdom of this philosophy. “One needs both,” he said. “To keep healthy.”

The Emperor clapped his hands. Instantly, the children ended the pretense of being statues. Quickly, they arranged themselves for a charade of lovemaking. One of the nymphs lay on her back, with her knees up. The other nymph then mounted her, facing in the opposite direction. That left the second nymph’s buttocks vulnerable to invasion, and, as was expected of him, the satyr immediately took advantage of the opening. With the three thus intricately interlocked, the intercourse, in two variations of its basic form, began. Tiberius and Caligula observed the action with considerable pleasure and some curiosity about technique.

A slave appeared, bringing the Emperor a fresh cup of wine. Before long, however, Tiberius’ attention became divided. With his eyes on the laboring of the nymphs and the satyr, but his mind on his role as the Emperor, he commented to Caligula, “Never forget that Rome is a republic and that you and I are simply plain citizens, like any other.” Then, stepping forward, he stroked the smooth cheeks of the satyr, who was beginning to lag in his enthusiasm for his task. “A bit more conviction, please,” Tiberius urged.

Instantly, the satyr’s thrusts became frenzied. “Better,” Tiberius told him, stepping back.

“But you are a god, Caesar,” Caligula said.

Tiberius looked at him reprovingly. “No. None of that,” he said sharply. “Not even when I’m dead.”

The subject of gods, so distasteful to Tiberius, caused him to lose interest in the lovemaking of the children. Glowering, he led the way from the grotto, leaving the adolescents to complete their chore in private.

“But your father and grandfather—Julius Caesar and Augustus—they are gods now,” Caligula said, persisting, as they moved on through the gardens.

“So we *say*,” Tiberius replied testily. “And so the people like to believe. But we are only men, Caligula. With one short life to lead.”

Unconvinced, Caligula chose to stay silent. They now entered a grove that served as a stage for a pair of black satyrs and a white nymph. The youngsters quickly went into their act, with the female servicing the two males simultaneously.

“So make life full,” Tiberius said to Caligula, his mood becoming congenial again as he observed the efforts of the three players. Digressing, he indicated one of the black youngsters. “I think he’s the best of my stallions,” he said. Then, returning to the prior subject, he added, “But serve the state well, even though the people in it are wicked beasts.”

"They love you, Lord."

Tiberius shook his head. "No. They fear me. And that is better than love. Love fades. Fear lasts. Love comes groveling for favors. Fear expects punishment and stays hidden."

Caligula pondered this wisdom thoughtfully.

"You can take it all," Tiberius said encouragingly to the white female, who was having difficulty receiving one of the blacks. "But you must relax." It was impossible at the moment for her to respond orally. She acknowledged the advice, however, by allowing her body to go almost completely slack.

"That's right," Tiberius told her approvingly. "Don't be so...so precious..." He turned his attention to Caligula once more. "I had no choice," he said.

Caligula was beginning to have trouble following the zig-zagging line of conversation. "No choice?"

Tiberius gave the two black youths a final pat of commendation, then set forth again, tagged after by Caligula.

"I never wanted to be emperor," he said. "All I wanted was a private life." They reached a grove where a half-dozen young men and women, alerted to the approach of the Emperor by the sound of his voice, were performing sexually. Their actions were practiced, beautifully and artfully carried out. It was as if they were performing an orgiastic ballet.

"I loved my first wife," Tiberius continued, as he and Caligula entered the grove. "Then Augustus made me divorce her." They paused to observe a pair of young women who were engaged in mutual cunnilingus while at the same time rolling slowly across the soft green grass in a stylized enactment of a death struggle.

"He made me marry his daughter," Tiberius said, proceeding. "I hated that woman. But I had to marry her. Just the way I had to become emperor."

Again, they paused. Here, a young woman was arched over backwards, while the young man who was inside her was revolving slowly in the manner of a wheel, turning on the axis of his penis. It was a performance that deserved more than casual recognition. Tiberius applauded exuberantly.

Caligula gave the act little notice, however. He was preoccupied with the Emperor's earlier statement, puzzled. "Why did you... *have* to become emperor?" he asked.

"To save my life," Tiberius replied. "Had someone else become emperor, I would have been killed." He moved on. "Just the way you'll be—" he began.

Caligula stopped, stunned.

"*Would* be," Tiberius said, smiling, changing the tense of his statement, "if you were not my heir."

Relieved, Caligula trailed after him again. Leaving the grove, they walked leisurely in the direction of the villa. As they passed shady glens and rocky grottos, n and satyrs and dwarfs and hunch backs and midgets appeared to present themselves to the emperor. Tiberius had a nod and a smile for each of them and a word or two of doting affection for his favorites.

And, at odd moments, speaking to Caligula, he was reflective. "When Rome was just a city and we were all citizens, known to each other..." he said, "...why, we had to be good, frugal, dignified." He sighed wistfully. "But then we conquered the earth."

A naked hermaphrodite came prancing out from the shadows of a grove.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Tiberius said to Caligula, pausing. He studied the hermaphrodite in fascination. "Both boy..." he said, giving the creature's penis a playful tug. "...and girl," he added, fondling the breasts. "Lucky thing."

Caligula was doing his best to keep back a look of disgust.

“We stole for ourselves the wealth of the world,” Tiberius said, strolling on. “And look at us!” He gave a nymph a passing pinch. “The Romans that I rule are not what they were. No. They lust for money, pleasure wives.” Caligula looked at him sideways, questioningly, not certain whether he was being serious or satirical.

“Yes!” Tiberius said sternly. “I am a true moralist. And strict as any Cato.” He shrugged. “Unfortunately,” he said, “fate chose me to govern swine. So, in my old age, I have become a swineherd.”

They were nearing the villa. Ahead, Nerva, along with two slaves, could be seen standing beside a table that was piled with documents. Tiberius’ expression turned glum as he contemplated the tiresome duty that awaited him. Then, glancing in the direction of the pool, he caught sight of the sentries, and the gloom that had overcome him suddenly lifted. He saw that the drunken soldier’s forced celebration was still going on. Delighted, Tiberius signal led to Caligula to follow, then set out toward the spot where the sentries were gathered.

The object of the punishment was now very nearly unconscious from drink. His belly bulged with the wine, giving him the appearance of a haggish woman in the final stage of pregnancy. His penis, tied tight with the noose, like links of sausage, had turned a sickening blackish-purple color. Wine, still being poured into his sagging mouth by the other soldiers, cascaded down his body in a never-ending red stream.

Viewing the victim, Tiberius chuckled amusedly, then addressed Caligula. “I think the boy has had enough for one day, don’t you?” he said.

“Yes, Lord,” Caligula replied disinterestedly.

Tiberius held out a hand to the Captain. Unsheathing his dagger, the Captain placed it in the Emperor’s waiting hand. Tiberius stepped forward and plunged the blade into the bloated bladder of the drunken soldier. There was a dull popping sound, a single strangled scream, then silence. A bilious-looking mixture of wine and urine spurted from the puncture and gushed like a waterfall down the sentry’s legs.

Tiberius handed the dagger back to the Captain. “Now...” he intoned solemnly, “...he...is happy...”

Caligula suddenly brightened. “That’s from Homer, he said, pleased with himself for having recognized the quotation. “It means he’s dead.”

Tiberius looked at him with utter contempt. “It’s a pity you were never educated in those army camps when you were a child,” he said. Then, resignedly, he shrugged off the feeling of despair that had abruptly seized him. “But... I suppose you know enough to be a swineherd,” he said.

4.

Nerva, who had watched the killing of the drunken sentry from a distance, had a look of revulsion on his face as Tiberius and Caligula approached him.

“Nerva, stop scowling at us,” Tiberius said crossly. “And help me transform this young barbarian into a Roman Caesar.

“There have been three Roman Caesars,” Nerva replied coldly. “Which do you want him to be? Julius? Augustus? Or yourself?”

“The best one, of course.”

“That would be your father Augustus,” Nerva told him.

Tiberius was amused. “See he said to Caligula. “See how I am Insulted to my face in my own house?” He faced the Senator again. “All right, Nerva,” he said, finished with the subject of the Caesars. “To work.”

Nerva handed him a document from the table. At the same moment, a slave stepped forward to fill the emperor’s wine cup. Tiberius waved the slave away. “The work of the empire requires a clear head,” he said brusquely.

Nerva identified the document for him. “The revised list of candidates for the equestrian order,” he said.

Nodding, Tiberius glanced fleetingly at the list, then signed it. “I, Tiberius Caesar,” he said rotely, stamping the document with the enormous seal ring on his left hand, “command in the name of the Senate and the people of Rome.”

Caligula watched studiously. When—or, more properly, if—he became emperor, this was an official duty that he would be required to perform.

Nerva passed another document to Tiberius. “Tax assessments,” he said. “For Asia Minor, Raetia and Gaul.”

Working quickly, Tiberius signed and sealed. “I, Tiberius Caesar command in the name of the Senate and the people of Rome.”

Nerva’s manner was reluctant as he offered the next paper for the Emperor’s signature. “Senators *allegedly* guilty of treason,” he said icily, identifying the list of names.

Tiberius’ only reaction to the Senator’s severe disapproval was a quick, apathetic glance. “The Senate is the natural enemy of any Caesar,” he said instructively, as he put his name then his seal to the document. “Every senator thinks of himself as a potential Caesar. Therefore, every senator is guilty of treason in thought if not in deed. Are you listening, Caligula?” he asked smoothly.

“Yes, Lord.”

The signing and sealing continued. With every paper that was banded to him, the Emperor’s mood became less congenial. The work of the empire bored him. When at last it was finished, he had become surly; to the point that even Nerva, when speaking to him, chose his words carefully. Caligula, fearful of the Emperor’s capricious temper, stood stock still, utterly silent, hoping to escape further notice.

Tiberius advised Nerva and Caligula gruffly that he would expect them to dine with him that evening—that being his way of dismissing them for the moment. Then, followed by slaves, he set out to return to the pool. It was obvious from his walk—suddenly jaunty—that the prospect of rejoining the nymphs and satyrs was already having a rejuvenating effect on the state of his imperial temper.

The three men met again that evening in one of the smaller dining rooms of the villa. There was a couch, scattered with pillows, for each of them. Tiberius occupied the center couch. Beside him was a wooden box, its lid clamped tightly closed. On the couch to his right was Caligula, sober and wary. Nerva’s expression, as he reclined on the couch to the Emperor’s left, was, as usual, disapproving. Tiberius had already been drunk when he arrived at the dining room. Thanks to the hot wine that was being served to him by his slaves, he was getting drunker by the moment.

“You know,” Tiberius said, his speech slurred, “the Senate offered to approve any law I made *before* I made it. Imagine!” he said, accepting a dish of jellied pea cock tongues from a slave. “So, I said to them: ‘What if I go mad? What then?’ He popped a peacock tongue into his mouth. “No answer. They were born to be slaves.” He turned to Caligula. “Never forget that, Germanicus.”

Caligula blinked at him in surprise.

"This is not Germanicus, Lord," Nerva advised the Emperor. "It is his son, Caligula."

"I know who it is," Tiberius responded crossly. "And Heaven help Rome when I'm gone."

A slave proffered a pig's bladder that was filled with pigeon stew. The Emperor waved it away, not ready for it yet.

"Where was I?" Tiberius said foggily. "Oh. They wanted to make me a god in my own lifetime! I said, 'I am a man.' Then they offered me this title and that title. 'No,' I said. 'I am simply first among you.'" He drank deeply from his cup of wine. "Of course," he said bitterly, as he lowered the cup, "they would kill me if they could..."

Immediately, a slave refilled the cup with wine. Turning his attention to the box that was resting on the couch at his side, Tiberius slowly raised the lid. Then, smiling woozily, he reached into the box and extracted a long, writhing snake. As if assuming a familiar position, the snake instantly coiled itself around the Emperor's forearm. Tiberius petted it lovingly, as he had caressed the satyrs and nymphs.

Caligula and Nerva exchanged glances. Caligula's was noncommittal. Nerva's look was of revulsion.

A servant scurried up to the Emperor's couch, bringing a plate of dead flies. "Thank you," Tiberius said politely to the servant. Then, "You're hungry, aren't you, darling," he said sweetly to the snake, feeding it a dead fly. In the next breath, he addressed Caligula once more. "Macro is your friend, isn't he?" he said.

Caught off-guard, Caligula hesitated nervously for a second. Then he replied, "Lord, he serves you and only you."

Raising his eyes, Tiberius spoke: despairingly to the ceiling. "They're all alike. They desert the setting sun," he said, touching his chest tragically. He looked again at Caligula. "For the rising sun." Then he turned his eyes to Nerva. "Watch out for Macro when I am dead," he warned.

Nerva nodded matter-of-factly. "Macro hates me," he said.

"Because you are wise," Tiberius told him. "Because you are good." He repeated the warning. "So when I am gone...beware."

"I have taken precautions, Caesar," Nerva assured him.

An adolescent boy appeared at the entrance to the dining room. He stood shyly in the doorway, peering at the men on the couches with wide-eyed fascination.

"My child...Gemellus..." Tiberius called out in delight, motioning for the boy to enter. "Flesh of my flesh...my only grandson...my *last* grandson...come kiss your old grandfather..."

"But I am your grandson, too," Caligula said resentfully, as Gemellus crossed the room toward the Emperor.

"Only by adoption. By fate's decree," Tiberius reminded him coldly. He wrapped his arms around the child Gemellus, kissing him wetly. "This is the last of line," he said. "Oh, lovely boy!" He hugged the child tightly and tears came to his eyes. "What, what will become of you?" he wept tragically.

"He is like a brother to me, Lord," Caligula said.

The Emperor's tears vanished. "A brother?" he said, chuckling. "You know what that means in our family. Murder. Brother against brother. Father against son. One by one, all have been swept away." He gestured vaguely. "By fate..."

"Not by fate," Nerva said. "By Tiberius."

“What?” Tiberius snapped, in a sudden rage. In the next second, though, the anger, like the tears, was gone. “Mmm, yes...Nerva...Nerva, old friend...” he murmured blearily. “If I have had cause to remove from this world...any member of my family...it is because he turned upon me. And that is blasphemy, for I am the chosen instrument of fate upon this earth. Challenge me and you challenge heaven itself.”

“You are not god, Tiberius,” Nerva told him irritably. “Not yet, anyway. Besides,” he reminded the Emperor, “you don’t believe in Heaven.”

Tiberius considered that point for a moment. “You’re right—I don’t,” he agreed, nodding. “I was over stating my case. A fault. I agree. But it *is* true,” he insisted, “that fate has given me the absolute power of life and death.” Saying that, he looked directly at Caligula, smiling tauntingly.

Caligula felt as if a cold, dead hand had suddenly gripped his heart. Still smiling, Tiberius handed his wine cup to the younger man. “Drink, Caligula,” he said, purring the words.

Caligula accepted the cup. But his hands were trembling too furiously to allow him to raise it to his lips. Abruptly, the child Gemellus took the cup from Caligula and started to drink from it.

At once, though—again in a fit of rage—Tiberius struck the cup from the boy’s grasp. Splashing wine in all directions, it went flying across the room. Instantly, the Emperor was repentant. Again, tears filled his eyes. He drew the now terrified Gemellus to him and, embracing him fiercely, began stroking the child’s hair.

“Poor boy,” Tiberius wept drunkenly. “When I am gone, Caligula will kill you.”

“No, I swear...” Caligula protested.

Tiberius ignored the disclaimer. “But then...” he said, the tears drying and the smile beginning to bloom once more, “...someone will kill Caligula.”

Caligula, appalled, drew back from him, sliding along the couch.

“Unless, of course, Caligula should die *before* I do,” Tiberius said brightly. He fixed Caligula with a physician’s probing look. “You do look rather pasty, I must say, told him. “Not well at all.”

Caligula felt his heart withering in the grip of the cold hand of death.

Later, when the dining was done and he had retired to his quarters, Caligula could still see the Emperor’s penetrating stare and hear his threatening words. Lying dressed on his bed, staring vacantly at the ceiling, he tried desperately to think of some trick that he could use to make Tiberius love him as much as he obviously loved Gemellus. But no artifice came to mind. The only solution to the problem, clearly, was for rate to take the Emperor before the Emperor could do away with Caligula. But there was little hope of that. For fate, Caligula reminded himself, was Tiberius’ servant, not his.

Caligula’s thoughts were suddenly interrupted by sounds of commotion coming from the corridor. Rising, he went to the door and opened it a bit and looked out. A servant, whom Caligula recognized as Nerva’s went running by. Then other servants appeared. They were Tiberius’, escorting the Emperor along the corridor. Curious, Caligula stepped from his room to meet them.

“What—” he began, as Tiberius drew near.

“It’s Nerva!” the Emperor replied sharply, hurrying on as fast as his aged body would allow him to travel. Caligula fell into line behind him. He asked no questions, fearful of the Emperor’s temper, and confident anyway that if he simply remained he would have the answers.

A few moments later, they entered a bath. The cause of all the concern and rushing became immediately evident. Nerva was lying on his back in a small sunken tub of warm water,

his head resting on the tiled edge. The water was gradually turning red from the blood that was seeping from the old man's slashed wrists. Two distraught slaves were standing nearby, wringing their hands, moaning. Nerva's own manner and expression was incongruously blissful.

"Don't leave us, master," the older of the two slaves begged.

"Be happy for me," Nerva replied weakly. "I am exchanging a prison for..." Becoming aware of Tiberius and, behind him, Caligula, he let the thought expire.

"Nerva! How dare you!" Tiberius raged. He turned to the senator's slaves. "Bind his wrists!" he commanded.

The slaves began tearing their clothing into strips.

But Nerva, his voice suddenly strong, stopped them. "No!" he said.

"No? To me?" Tiberius said indignantly. He motioned urgently to the slaves. "Hurry..."

"If you don't let me die now," Nerva told Tiberius grimly, "I shall find a way to die tomorrow...or the day after."

"How can you leave me like this?" Tiberius demanded. "You are my oldest, my dearest friend."

"Because I am your oldest, your dearest friend, I *am* leaving you—like this," Nerva replied.

"Why?" the Emperor asked, baffled.

When he spoke again there was a fuzzy softness to tone. "To choose the hour of one's own death... that's the closest a man can ever come to tricking fate. . ."

"Well, I'll trick you," Tiberius said stubbornly. "I'll stop this!" Again, he motioned to the slaves. "Hurry up!" he commanded.

The slaves approached Nerva timidly. Staring at them glacially, the Senator froze them in their tracks. Tiberius, conceding defeat, threw up his hands in surrender.

"I have lived long enough, Tiberius," Nerva said quietly, facing the Emperor once more. "And I hate my life."

"You hate your life?" This was beyond Tiberius' comprehension. "Why?"

"You ask me? One by one, I have watched you murder your family, your friends, the best men of Rome."

The words cut deeply into Tiberius, causing him to wince painfully. The shock was not long-lasting, however. In the next second, realizing that the slaves, too, had heard what the Senator had said to him, he recovered. Turning viciously on the slaves, he gestured toward the exit.

"Out!"

Terrified, they went racing from the bath. Caligula, equally fearful, started to depart along with the fleeing slaves. But then, realizing that the Emperor was paying absolutely no attention to him whatsoever, he elected to stay. Doing his best to keep out of the Emperor's range of vision, he continued to observe and listen.

"We *were* friends...years ago..." Nerva said weakly to Tiberius.

"We are. We *are* friends!"

"Whatever we are—or were—you will die soon," Nerva said.

Tiberius took in a sharp breath, suddenly afraid. "How do you know?" he demanded, thinking that the Senator knew of some plot against him.

Nerva ignored the Emperor's sudden panic. "And when you are gone," he continued, "Macro will kill me."

"I shall arrest him," Tiberius said. "Now. Will that please you? I shall have him executed. Treason."

Nerva's eyes closed. "You cannot control him," he responded, his voice fading. "But he can control you." Slowly, his eyes opened again. "Anyway, even if Macro were dead..." he said. His eyes shifted to Caligula. "...how am I to live with *this*?"

For a fraction of an instant, Caligula's expression turned stone-hard. Then, as he regained control, the hardness became a mask-like sweetness.

"You will always respect my friend, won't you?" Tiberius asked Caligula, pleading.

"Yes, Caesar," Caligula replied obsequiously. "I do respect ...and honor him."

"You hear that?" Tiberius said to Nerva.

Unimpressed, the Senator dismissed Caligula's promise with a fleeting look of disdain. "Tiberius," he said, "you were—once—modest... learned... wise..."

Ashamed, Tiberius turned away. "Don't taunt me. I know I'm old. I forget..."

"I have watched you become a monster..." Nerva went on.

"This is treason," Caligula said pompously.

"That is truth," Nerva told him. "If you are to rule, Little Boots, you should learn the difference between truth and treason."

"You are cruel," Tiberius said to his old friend, his back to him. "I am... I have always been... surrounded by enemies. Enemies in my own family... in the Senate..."

"So, if power was able to destroy the mind and character of my old friend Tiberius," Nerva said feebly, "what will power do to this ignorant boy? This boy, brought up in army camps...taught nothing but how to be your slave..."

"Caligula serves me...well."

"Dying men can sometimes see the future," Nerva said, turning his eyes to Caligula once more. "This best of slaves will be the worst of masters. So..." His eyes closed again. "...from evils past, and evils yet to come, I now escape."

"You have hurt me," Tiberius said softly, tears glistening in his eyes.

"Goodbye..." Nerva murmured.

Turning back to him, Tiberius reached out a hand, as if to try to catch hold of Nerva and keep him from leaving. "You...you..." He seemed to realize all at once that words were powerless. His arm dropped to his side.

Then, in tears, his head lowered, he left the bath. Caligula remained. Moving to the edge of the tub, he stared interestedly at the spreading redness in the water, at Nerva's closed eyelids, and listened intently to the old man's faint breathing. His look was that of a scientist observing the mysterious syntheses in a new and particularly fascinating experiment.

"What is it like?" Caligula asked, his voice hardly more than a whisper. For a second there was silence. Then Nerva answered, murmuring. "Warm. Pleasant."

Caligula squatted beside the tub. "I don't mean the bath," he said.

"There is no pain," Nerva told him. "One just drifts away.. •"

"Is that all?"

Silence.

"Do you see her yet?" Caligula asked, a sudden urgency to his tone.

"Her? Who?"

"The goddess. Isis."

Nerva's eyelids opened for a second, flickered, then closed again. There was a faint smile on his lips. "So you're one of those," he said. "No, there is no goddess. There is nothing."

"Are you sure?" Caligula asked doubtfully. He touched the old man's pale flesh. "You're growing cold. You're almost dead."

There was no reply.

“What is it like?” Caligula asked fiercely. “What is happening?”
“Nothing...” The word barely escaped from the old man lips.
“You’re lying!” Caligula raged. “You can see her. I know you can. Tell me! Quick. Before you go. *What is she like?*”
“There is nothing... only... sleep...”
“Liar!” Caligula shouted. He kicked viciously at the bloody water.
Nerva, no longer conscious, slipped silently below the surface. A bubble, created by his final breath, marked the point of his passing for a second, then burst.

5.

Standing in the shadow of a pillar in the evening dimness, Macro, commander of the imperial guard, awaited the arrival of Charicles, the physician who was approaching him along a corridor of the villa. Charicles was elderly and frail. He moved slowly and precisely, as if he were calculating the significance of every step before he took it. Macro, a man of action, watched him impatiently.

At last, the two men met. They nodded to each other, then walked along together, proceeding at the pace set by the aging physician. For the moment, they had nothing to say. A short distance on, they came to a checkpoint. A sentry barred the way.

“Password?” the sentry said.

“Eternity,” Macro replied.

“Pass.”

A few moments later, out of the range of hearing of the sentry, Macro spoke.
“Well ?”

“He won’t let me examine him,” Charicles responded.

“But you saw him at dinner.”

“Only at a distance,” Charicles said.

Macro made a face of annoyance, then became thoughtful. “After Nerva died, he was partly paralyzed,” he said.

“There is no sign of paralysis now...from a distance,” Charicles said. “But I can tell. From the color of his face—the lack of color—from the eyes...”

As they passed an alcove, Caligula appeared from the dimness, joining them. “The physician Charicles, Prince,” Macro said, introducing Caligula to his companion. Caligula had no interest in niceties. “How long?” he asked the physician, speaking his mind candidly.

Charicles flinched at the bluntness. “Not long...” he answered. He halted. “You will excuse me, Prince,” he said. Then, plodding on, he turned into the intersecting corridor.

“He’s planning something. I can tell,” Caligula said apprehensively to Macro, watching the elderly man disappear into the dimness.

Macro, however, was all confidence. “He can do nothing without me,” he said.

“So others thought,” Caligula said drearily. “And where are they?”

“Don’t worry,” Macro said, as they walked on. “You will be emperor soon.”

“You swear?” Caligula asked, still doubtful.

“I swear.” Macro’s cocksureness, however, was not transferable—at least not to Caligula. The Prince’s expression grew even more dubious, as the ravenous fear that death would claim him before it claimed the Emperor ate deeper into him.

The two men stopped at a doorway. Macro opened the door, stepped back to allow Caligula to enter, then followed him through the opening. They were inside Macro’s quarters,

which were elegantly furnished. Moving on to a second doorway, this one curtained, Macro paused, waiting. Struggling within himself to overcome his pessimism and the distress it created, Caligula joined him.

Macro pulled aside the curtain, revealing a lavishly furnished bedroom. "My wife is waiting," he said to Caligula.

Caligula looked past him. Ennia was there, along with a pair of eunuchs. She was a strikingly beautiful, full-bodied woman, dressed in a gown that concealed almost nothing. The shallow light in the room reflected softly off the lush roundness of her breasts, the suppleness of her thighs. She was smiling seductively.

"Waiting with her eunuchs," Macro said, amusement in his tone. "Vicious old things, aren't they?"

The fat, womanish creatures giggled childishly. "From Parthia," Macro told Caligula. "They were castrated *before* puberty."

"That's very important..." Caligula said dimly. Ennia spoke. "Come in, my Lord... Caligula," she purred.

Caligula hesitated. Macro, having been given his cue, turned and walked back across the main room. A moment later the outer door closed behind him. Caligula, his mood lightening, stepped into the bed room. As he entered, the eunuchs, giggling once more, departed. The curtain was pulled closed. Ennia, moving to meet Caligula, slipped the gown from her shoulders, allowing it to drop to the floor.

Emerging from Macro's quarters into the bright light of morning, Caligula blinked rapidly, adjusting his eyes to the sunny glare. From somewhere not far away came sounds of play; young men calling out to each other in spirited camaraderie. Caligula stretched and yawned, then, curious, left the villa and set out across the gardens in the direction from which the sounds were coming.

His curiosity took him to the exercise grounds, a broad sweep of green lawn where young guardsmen were practicing the skills of their profession, javelin throwing, archery and swordsmanship. Looking beyond the playing field, Caligula saw the Emperor seated in the shade of the surrounding trees. Tiberius was being served by his secretaries, who were providing him with a constant flow of documents to sign and seal. A short distance away from the Emperor, seated on the grass, was the boy Gemellus. At the sight of the youngster, Caligula glared venomously across the broad stretch of grounds that separated them. The boy, being the Emperor's favorite, represented a serious threat to his ambitions; very possibly, even to his life.

Determined to guard his interests, Caligula set off across the field toward the shady grove in which the Emperor, the secretaries and Gemellus were ensconced. On the way, he observed the athletics of the guardsmen. One of the young men in particular attracted his attention. He was uncommonly handsome—Greek-like in appearance—with a sleek, slender body, classic facial features, and hair that was a mass of golden curls. Watching him, Caligula idly touched his own forehead, subconsciously and unhappily reminding himself of his receding hairline.

Reaching the grove, Caligula seated himself in an unoccupied chair beside the Emperor. Tiberius, busy with the work of the empire, seemed totally unaware of his arrival. Caligula, thus, had the opportunity to study the old man closely. It was obvious that Tiberius was even less well now than he had been when Caligula arrived on Capri. His eyes had a yellowish tint. His eczematous flesh was so lacking in color that it was almost transparent.

"I, Tiberius," the Emperor muttered, "command in the name of the Senate and the people of Rome." He pressed his ring against the document that the secretary was holding for him.

Caligula glanced toward Gemellus. The boy was watching the guardsmen, caught up in the spirit of the play.

"The revised list of pro-consuls—" a secretary began, presenting a fresh document to the Emperor.

Tiberius waved it away. "That's enough," he said irritably. The secretary stepped back. "Nothing more today," Tiberius said. "Except, I want to see the...the..." In his encroaching senility the word, the phrase he wanted was eluding him. "...the *Official Gazette* when it arrives."

"Yes, Caesar," the secretary said fawningly, retreating. Tiberius, squinting, peered out at the athletic endeavors of the young guardsmen. Drool leaked out of a corner of his flabby mouth. He chuckled, as if he recalling some joke that he had found especially amusing. Then, at last, he took notice of Caligula's presence. "Why do you never exercise?" he asked.

"But I do, Lord," Caligula replied.

"Only in bed," Tiberius said sourly. He looked straight into the Prince's eyes. "How is she?"

"How is who, Lord?" Caligula replied warily.

Tiberius faced toward the playing field again. "Ennia," he said.

Caligula felt sudden warmth in his face that told him he was blushing. "I don't know..." he replied, flustered. "I mean...I see her... I talk to her, that is..."

Tiberius cut him off. "I know everything...every thing that is said...done..." Once more, he turned his eyes to Caligula. "...and thought." Then, slowly, he shifted his gaze to Gemellus. An adoring smile gradually replaced his look of repugnance. "Come here, lovely boy," he called out.

Gemullus got quickly to his feet and hurried to his grandfather's side. "At least you are too young to plot against me," Tiberius said, slipping an arm around the boy's waist. Immediately, though, the smile faded and his hold on his grandson went slack. "Well, not *too* young, perhaps," he said tragically. Releasing Gemullus, he gestured feebly toward the playing field. "Go on," he said, addressing both Gemullus and Caligula. "Practice with the others."

Delighted, Gemullus went skipping out onto the exercise ground. He was followed reluctantly a few moments later by Caligula. At once, slaves gathered around them, offering them swords, javelins and bows and arrows. The guardsmen continued their practice, pretending not to notice that they had been joined by the two princes. But it was evident from their covert glances at Caligula and Gemellus that they were, in fact, acutely aware of their presence.

Caligula and Gemullus each took a javelin. Caligula held his awkwardly. The boy, however, weighed his weapon across his open palm, seeking its center of gravity, adjusting his hold on it to get a proper balance. A few steps away from them, the guardsman who had attracted Caligula's notice earlier—the handsome young man with the golden curls—hurled his javelin at the target, a life-size dummy of a man. The point of the javelin sank deep into the dummy's heart.

There was immediate applause from the others. Gemullus took the guardsman's place. He aimed, then threw. The javelin arced beautifully across the open space—Gemullus and the target, then, as if drawn by a magnet, sank squarely into the heart. Taking into consideration the boy's age and size, the applause from the others was even more spirited this time.

"Well done, Gemullus," Caligula said sweetly—perhaps a touch too sweetly—stepping forward and replacing the boy at the throwing line. Innocently, Gemullus smiled happily at this apparent show of approval from the man who might someday be emperor.

Caligula now raised his javelin. It teetered in his hand for a moment. Then he threw. The javelin sailed high. But it came do short of the target, plunging ignominiously into earth rather than into some vital organ of the make-believe enemy.

From behind Caligula came a soft ripple of laughter. His face red with embarrassment, he turned in fury on the guardsmen. By then, though, they had smothered their amusement, adjusting their expressions, and were looking appropriately grave. The young man with the golden curls stepped forward. "You held the javelin too high, Lord," he said helpfully to Caligula.

"The sun was in my eyes!" Caligula snapped.

As one, the other guardsmen turned their eyes toward the sun, squinting. It could be seen clearly from its position in the sky that it had been to the Prince's back where he had been standing at the throwing line and facing the target.

"Who are you?" Caligula asked the guardsman with the curls.

"Proculus, Lord."

"Well, I am in no need of your advice, Proculus," Caligula told him sharply. "I was brought up with soldiers. I am very proficient with the javelin—when the sun is not in eyes."

"Yes, Lord," Proculus replied, bowing and retreating.

Still smarting from embarrassment, Caligula took a sword from a slave. Motioning to Gemellus, he indicated that he should do the same. Then, when the two princes were armed, they squared off against each other. It became obvious after only a few moments of feinting that the boy was the better swordsman. His movements were quick and agile, while Caligula's, as with the javelin, were awkward.

As they shifted about, thrusting and parrying, Caligula began to perspire copiously; not from the physical effort, but from the realization that once more he was going to be bested. His anger was rising to a rage. Seeing what was happening—and suddenly aware of the danger it might represent to himself—the younger prince all at once became clumsy. And Caligula, to his own immense pleasure, was able to penetrate the boy's defense and touch his heart, taking the match.

"Well fought," Caligula said magnanimously to Gemellus. Then, heady with victory, he turned to Proculus. "Now, you," he announced. With a degree of reluctance, Proculus took a sword from a slave, then the two men, the guardsman and the prince, faced each other. Caligula pranced, wielding his sword artlessly. Proculus, knowing his role, gave the Prince every opportunity to score against him. But it was not to be. Time and again, Caligula failed to take advantage of the openings that were offered. Then, in making a move that he felt would guarantee his defeat, Proculus accidentally struck Caligula's sword from his grasp.

Stunned, Caligula stared at his empty hand. There was an ominous silence. "I'm sorry, Lord," Proculus said, flustered.

Fury boiled up in Caligula. "You cheated!" he charged.

"Why no, Lord," Proculus replied. "But my arm is a bit longer than yours and—"

"You were off the line!" Caligula raged. "You cheated! You—" The tantrum was abruptly cut short. From the grove came a loud, bull-like roar of righteous wrath. The voice was Tiberius'. Instantly, Caligula turned and ran toward the sound, followed by Gemellus. When they reached the Emperor he was holding the *Official Gazette* and was sputtering and drooling, apoplectic with fury.

"What is it, Caesar?" Caligula asked, baffled.

"The *Gazette*!" Tiberius replied, spraying Caligula with spit "I can't believe it. I sent the Senate three criminals. Three magistrates. All guilty of treason. And the Senate—" His hand shaking, he thrust the Gazette at Caligula. "Look! They— They dismissed the charges! They said they were only—only—based on an informer...a mere informer...when I am...when I am..." His indignation was such that he could barely speak. "Oh, this...this is contempt!" He struggled to

rise. “We go to Rome!” he bellowed. “We go to Rome!” On his feet, Tiberius staggered, lurching.

Caligula reached out to him. But the Emperor pushed him away, refusing his aid. “I have been...I have been...” Tiberius fumed, almost incoherent. “Oh, I have been too lenient!” He halted, gasping for breath! “Well! Well! Let the Senate beware. Because I swear by Heaven that...that....” His expression suddenly went flat, a glassiness came to his eyes and Tiberius pitched forward, losing consciousness.

Caligula and a secretary, grabbing for the old man at the same time, managed to catch him before he hit the ground. Supporting him between them, half carrying and half dragging him, they set out for the villa. Gemellus, pale and frightened, trailed after them. On the playing field, the guardsmen continued with their exercises, being very careful to pretend that they were not aware of what had happened in the grove.

6.

On orders from Charicles the physician, only a single lamp was burning in the Emperor’s bedroom—and that lamp was fueled with a special oil, the fumes of which were supposed to have curative powers. It was doubtful, however, that those fumes would ever reach the nostrils of the stricken Tiberius. For they were overwhelmed by the odors of Charicles’ other medicines: ointments, spices, roots, leaves, animal fats, honey, and so on. The room reeked with an olio of conflicting aromas.

On the bed, Tiberius laid absolutely still, his chest bared and a brine-soaked plaster resting on it. The old man’s face was in repose, the pale, scaly flesh sagging loosely, the eyelids closed. There was no indication whatsoever of life; no sign of respiration, no involuntary tics of the muscles. So, now, Charicles began an examination to determine if what appeared to be true was actually true. He felt for a pulse. He pulled back an eyelid and peered studiously at the exposed eye. Then, after removing the plaster, he put an ear to the Emperor’s chest and listened. The examination completed, he straightened, looking professionally thoughtful.

Caligula and Macro, the captain of the imperial guard, stepped forward out of the shadows, where, along with two of the Emperor’s personal slaves, they had been waiting for the examination to conclude.

“Is he dead?” Caligula asked.

Charicles seemed unwilling to believe what the evidence had told him. “With this sort of seizure...” he said evasively.

“Is he dead?” Caligula demanded.

“Yes, Lord. But—”

That was sufficient information for Caligula. He quickly motioned to one of the slaves. “The ring!” he snapped.

Weeping, the slave moved to the Emperor’s bedside, then slipped the signet ring from the old man’s withered finger. He held it for an instant, begrudging it to the Prince. But then, when Caligula stiffened, he handed it over.

The expression on Caligula’s face as he placed the ring on his own finger was the euphoric look of a tired and sweaty man as he lowered himself into a warm and soothing bath. Relief, peace-of-mind, at last, was his. Macro kneeled, kissing Caligula’s hand. “Hail, Caesar,” he said softly.

Caligula luxuriated in the feeling of euphoria for only a second more. Then he gave his first command as Emperor. “Make the announcement,” he said to Macro, speaking crisply.

Macro hurried from the bedroom, followed by Charicles. The slaves receded into the shadows. Caligula, exultant, did several steps of his war dance, then, mildly subdued, crossed to the bed.

“Well, Tiberius,” he said, “I death really nothing? Or is she there? Is Isis there? Ready to judge you?” From beyond the room came sounds of wailing. The announcement of the death had been made. Listening, Caligula’s look became resentful.

Then, however, came more pleasing sounds. Cheering. Cries of “Hail, Caesar!” The change of command was proceeding orderly. With a simple alteration in tone, the functionaries were transferring their allegiance from the dead Caesar to the living Caesar. Delighted with the ease with which he was gaining the love and loyalty of his subjects, Caligula moved toward the door to be closer to the sounds of cheering.

“Caligula...”

This new sound, his name being spoken, stopped Caligula short. It had come from the direction of the bed, the voice of a ghost. Whipping around, he stared in astonishment at what he saw. Tiberius was alive. He had raised himself to one elbow and was peering in anger at the finger that was now encircled by the imperial ring.

“Lord!” Caligula breathed, shocked. Tiberius seemed to have regained almost his full strength. “Give me the ring!” he commanded.

For a second, Caligula was petrified, able to do no more than stare as the old man continued to try to rise. Then, regaining a modicum of composure, he quickly signaled to the slaves, ordering them to withdraw. They vanished behind a curtain.

“Give me the ring,” Tiberius persisted.

“No,” Caligula answered. His voice was thick, choked with a rising fear.

“Yes,” Tiberius insisted firmly.

Trembling, Caligula drew his dagger. Timidly, he approached the bed. Tiberius was not impressed. “You do not dare,” he said contemptuously.

His hand shaking, Caligula raised the dagger.

“Guards!” Tiberius cried out.

Caligula was routed. Dropping the dagger, his face contorted with terror, he bolted toward the door. Reaching the opening, however, he was stopped suddenly once more, this time by a collision with Macro, who was returning. Caligula clutched at Macro wildly. “He... Macro... he’s not... he...” he babbled.

From the bed, Tiberius spoke up, also addressing the commander of the guards. “‘He’ is still Emperor of Rome, Macro,” he announced ominously, again struggling to get out of bed.

“Yes, Lord. ‘He’ is,” Macro responded. Aware of the threat in Macro’s tone, Tiberius paused in his effort to rise and peered across the room at him.

Macro had eased Caligula aside and was striding purposefully toward the bed. As he neared it, terror flashed in Tiberius’ eyes. Frantically, he resumed the struggle to rise. But he became entangled in the sheet.

Then Macro reached him. Snatching up the pillow, he shoved it into the Emperor’s face and forced him back down against the bed. Tiberius’ final struggle was valiant—but brief. In a matter of seconds he was still once more. This time there was no question about him being dead.

Lifting the pillow from the old man’s face, Macro dropped it casually to the bed. Then, turning, smiling softly, he faced Caligula again. “Caligula,” he said with total certainty, “is Emperor of Rome.”

“Are...are you sure?” Caligula whimpered. “Absolutely? Are you absolutely sure that he’s—”

“Get ready,” Macro said in reply. “Everyone is waiting in the great hail.” He left the bed, moving toward the doorway.

Caligula stopped him. “Macro,” he said, with sudden and genuine warmth, “I shall never forget this.”

Macro saluted, smiling in the same comradely way, then went on, disappearing beyond the doorway. Cautiously, Caligula approached the bed. From a short distance, he examined the face of the Emperor with extreme care, looking as if he might bolt for the door again at any second. At last, though, he became convinced that Tiberius was actually and finally dead. A wave of vast relief swept over him and he raised his eyes to heaven, giving thanks.

Turning toward the curtains, Caligula clapped his hands. Reluctantly, the slaves reappeared. “Send for the embalmer,” Caligula commanded. “Prepare the death mask.”

“Yes, Caesar,” one of the slaves replied meekly. Caligula started toward the door, confident now, striding. But then he paused. “You saw what happened, didn’t you?” he said to the slaves.

The two slaves shook their heads vigorously, terrified, denying that they had witnessed the murder. “Yes, you *did* see,” Caligula told them. “And... if you remember *exactly* what you saw, I shall make you both free men. Do you understand?”

For an instant, the slaves looked perplexed. Then, as they realized that what Caligula wanted from them was the truth, their facial expressions relaxed. “Yes, Lord,” one of the slaves replied gratefully, speaking for both of them.

“You will write out an account of what happened,” Caligula said. “You will both sign it. As free men.” He lowered his voice and his tone became confidential. “Speak of this to no one.”

“Yes, Lord,” the slave responded, nodding. Once more, Caligula moved toward the doorway. And again he was stopped—this time by a scraping Sound that had come from behind the curtains on the opposite side of the bedroom. Alarmed, Caligula went to the curtains and pulled them open. The boy Gemellus was there, looking terrified.

“Caesar...” Gemellus murmured, dropping to his knees. He kissed the ring on Caligula’s hand.

Caligula smiled, almost lovingly. “Gemellus...” he said softly.

Surprised by the warmth in Caligula’s tone, Gemellus raised his eyes questioningly. Caligula offered him a hand, then lifted him to his feet. In a sudden gesture of affection, he embraced the boy. “We are alone now,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “We must love each other, Gemellus.”

7.

Standing with his three sisters at the Tomb of Augustus, Caligula remembered the nightmare. And with good reason. All of the sights and sounds of the terrifying dream were there. The wails and moans of the mourners. The eerie, forlorn tones of the funeral dirge. A sudden icy chill caused him to shudder inwardly. He was not absolutely sure whether this was the real thing or the nightmare revisited. Unaware of what he was doing, he began the war dance, shifting his feet listlessly.

His sister Drusilla touched his arm. “Don’t,” she whispered. “It’s all right.”

Caligula became motionless again. “It’s like the dream,” he said. The men in the masks were appearing now, approaching the tomb. The goddess Venus. Julius Caesar. Augustus Caesar. Germanicus. And now, Tiberius, the face hideous, as it had been at the moment of suffocation.

Perspiration seeped from Caligula's pores, washing down his face. He could barely breathe. The scene began to waver and shimmer. "Isis. . . goddess. . . save me..." he murmured wretchedly.

"It's only a mask," Drusilla reminded him.

"It's the dream."

"No. You're awake," Drusilla said firmly. "And he's really dead. You are Caesar now." Gradually, Caligula accepted the reality of what he was seeing. In his mind, he repeated his sister's words:

"You are Caesar now... You are Caesar now... are Caesar now." The fear faded from his expression, replaced by a look of wonder. "Caesar..." he murmured ecstatically.

"You are Emperor of Rome," Drusilla said. "I like this dream," Caligula said. "You are lord of the world," Drusilla told him. He was no longer perspiring. His breaths came easily now. "If I am the lord of the world, then I am the lord of dreams," he said, smiling brightly at the logicalness of the thought. "Yes... I like *this* dream..."

The procession had passed. The mourners, done with mourning, were now hailing the new emperor, shouting loudly and fervently in unison.

"Cal-ig-u-la! Cal-ig-u-la! Cal-ig-u-la!"

In response to the cheering, the adulation, all doubts about himself ended. The last trace of the nightmare receded into the most distant, darkest corner of his conscious mind, perhaps suppressed forever. A radiant smile lighted his face. And the smile, delighting the crowd, gave their cheers the authority and resounding roar of Jovian thunder.

"Calig-u-la! Cal-ig—u-la! Cal-ig-u-la!"

From the apse of the Senate, standing beneath the statue of Victory, Caligula surveyed the faces of the men who had gathered before him in the chamber. They were the Senators, the elite of Rome. Close at hand were Drusilla and his two other sisters. Drusilla was doing her best to keep her countenance solemn—since she was, after all, still in mourning—but every now and then a small smile of pleasure manage to escape, nevertheless. At Caligula's left stood Macro, quite obviously pleased and making no attempt at all to conceal the fact. At the far end of the chamber, in the company of a group of noble ladies, stood Ennia, Macro's wife and Caligula's mistress, looking smug.

Caligula had reason to be encouraged by what he saw on the faces of the Senators. Nowhere was there any sign of antagonism. The expressions were either noncommittal or approving. Briefly, the warning words of Tiberius crossed his mind: every senator thinks of himself as a potential Caesar; therefore, every senator is guilty of treason in thought if not in deed. But, in this congenial atmosphere, it was impossible to give much credence to such pessimistic philosophy. So, matching the Senators in good-feeling, Caligula now addressed them.

"For twenty-three years," he said, "Tiberius was our father. And we—all of us—were his children." For his next words he became appropriately reverential. "As he was dying," he told the Senators, "he begged us to carry on his good work..."

From outside the chamber came the sound of a man's voice, shouting. "To the Tiber with Tiberius! Chuck him in the river!" The Senators began murmuring, indignant at this blasphemy.

Caligula, however, pretended not to have heard. Continuing, he made a pronouncement that he was certain would be received favorably. "All those in prisons, no matter what the charge," he informed the Senators, "I order freed."

His estimation of the reaction was correct. An almost hysterical cheer rose from his audience. Caligula, going on, had very nearly to shout to be heard over the rejoicing.

“All those who have been exiled from Rome,” he announced, “I do now recall. I grant a general amnesty...”

The cheering rose in volume, becoming an ear-splitting din. Senators embraced each other in joyful celebration. “Silence!” a young senator named Longinus cried out. “Great Caesar is not finished.” The chamber became quiet.

“My lords,” Caligula said earnestly, “we begin a new era. Old quarrels are to be forgotten. Old fears are to be put to rest.” The senators nodded happily. “At the insistence of the Senate and the people of Rome,” Caligula said, “I accept—humbly—the highest office of the Republic, the Consulship.” There was discreet applause.

“As my fellow Consul,” Caligula announced, “the Senate and the people of Rome have chosen my beloved and wise uncle... Claudius.”

Surprised, the senators stared at him blankly, not certain whether he was serious or jesting. When his expression remained solemn, however, they decided that he had indeed meant what he had said. So they applauded once more. Not, though, with any of the enthusiasm that had sparked their previous demonstrations of approval.

The most surprised among those present appeared to be Uncle Claudius himself. A frail, middle-aged man, with the manner of a dithery old woman, he reacted to Caligula’s announcement with open-mouthed shock. Trying to speak—to acknowledge that he had heard—he emitted a series of confused stammers. Then, having failed to express himself in words, he simply drooled.

Caligula reached out to him. “Claudius...”

Claudius rushed toward him. In his haste and excitement, however, he lost control of his spindly legs, stumbling. A pair of Senators caught him, fortunately, before he fell flat on his face. Amused, they stood him upright and sent him on his way. Caligula urged his uncle on. “Come take your place beside me,” he called out, struggling to keep from laughing.

Claudius reached the dais. “Caesar...Caligula...I mean Consul...” he said slavishly. Then, overcome by nervousness, he burst into a fit of tittering laughter.

The laughter was echoed by the Senators. But Caligula silenced them, scanning their faces coldly. In the uneasy quiet, Caligula extended his hand to his uncle. Claudius kissed it. Caligula faced the Senators again.

Looking confused, Claudius stepped back into the apse. He seemed to realize—and with some relief—that he had already served whatever purpose it was that Caligula had in mind for him; that, having had his brief moment of attention, he was now in retirement, eligible for a nice little pension.

“In accordance with the wishes of my beloved predecessor,” Caligula said, addressing the Senators once more, “I herewith adopt as my son and heir, the Prince Gemellus.”

Gemellus, standing a short distance away, smiled suspiciously. As he had to his uncle, Caligula held out his arms to the boy. “Come I forward...my son.” Gingerly, Gemellus advanced to the dais. There, Caligula put a paternal arm around him. As he was embraced, Gemellus trembled slightly. Then, positioning the boy at his right, Caligula faced the senators again.

“I now make legal the worship of the goddess Isis,” he informed them.

There were murmurs. This time the reaction had an undercurrent of resistance. “All official oaths,” Caligula continued, “will contain the phrase: ‘I will not value my life or that of my children less highly than I do the safety of the Emperor... *and of his sister*, Drusilla.’”

There was an awkward silence. Senators glanced uncomfortably at one another.

Caligula looked pointedly at Longinus, the senator who had earlier quieted the Senate so that he could speak. And Longinus, as if responding to a signal, spoke the words that would bring the session to a close. "Hail, Caesar!" he cried out.

Obediently, the senators answered. "Hail, Caesar!"

The new Emperor's demeanor was sober as he entered his palace bedroom accompanied by his sister, Drusilla. Once inside, though, with the door closed—hidden from the watchful eyes of the servants and slaves—he became a rollicking youth. Skipping about the room, grinning from ear to ear, he applauded his performance in the Senate chamber. Facing a shrine to himself—the miniature army uniform, including the tiny boots, that he had worn when he was a child—he bowed low, giggling, in mock obeisance to his exalted self. Then, striding grandly around the room, he beamed at the walls, as if they were lined with rank upon rank of his adoring subjects.

Drusilla, reeling on the bed, observed her brother's antics with affectionate amusement. Caligula halted before her. "Did you see?" he said, bubbling with elation. "Did you see their faces when I told them they had to swear not only to me but to you?"

"I saw," Drusilla replied, smiling. "They were appalled."

"Yes!" Caligula agreed.

"But is it wise?" Drusilla asked. "Won't they—"

Caligula had hopped onto the bed with her. He kissed her eagerly. "Love," he told her, "I can do—" He kissed her again. "—anything—" Once more, a kiss. "—I like—" Another kiss. "—to anyone."

"Well, don't start with me," Drusilla replied, fending him off.

Caligula rolled away from her and bounded to his feet. He began marching around the room again, unable in his excitement to stay still for more than a moment. "Happily," he announced, "we have decided in our imperial wisdom to be a kind and loving father to our people."

"What have we done to deserve you...oh, loving father?" Drusilla asked amusedly.

"Absolutely nothing," Caligula replied, still prancing about the room. "But I'm out to make fools of Tiberius and Nerva, now roasting in hell." He stopped and shouted at the floor. "Did you hear that, you two? Remember when you said I'd be a monster?"

"Shhh..." Drusilla cautioned, assuming that the servants would be listening.

But Caligula, unfazed, continued to scold Tiberius and Nerva for their ill thoughts about him. "That I was too stupid, too ignorant to be emperor? Well, I am a heavenly emperor! Ask anyone." In a sudden inspiration, he clapped his hands sharply.

Two eunuchs appeared.

"Capons..." Caligula said cheerily.

The eunuchs snickered girlishly.

"Am I not a wonderful, heavenly, kind emperor of Rome?" Caligula asked.

"Yes, Lord," they replied in unison.

"Thank you, capons." Immediately, the eunuchs withdrew.

"See?" Caligula said smugly to his sister.

"Oh, you are perfect," Drusilla said mockingly.

Caligula sighed blissfully. "I know," he said. "Isn't Rome lucky?"

Drusilla gestured vaguely, implying that that matter was still open to question. Caligula suddenly looked thoughtful. "What does an emperor do now?" he asked. I have addressed the Senate. I have accepted the will of the people, becoming Consul. I have issued

decrees. And the day is not even half over. What does—” Abruptly, he brightened. “Of course, I inspect the palace. After all,” he said, going toward the doorway, “it is my home.”

Leaving the bedroom and crossing the atrium, Caligula came upon Longinus, the senator who had been so helpful to him during his appearance before the Senate. Longinus had come to discuss with him some of the matters of state that Caligula had not touched upon during his address. Electing to mix the public business of the empire with the personal business of the Emperor, Caligula invited the senator to accompany him on the tour of the palace.

“There is the matter of appointing magistrates,” Longinus began.

Looking into a small room off the main corridor, Caligula reacted with surprise. Inside were a number of the children, costumed as satyrs and nymphs, who had been on the island of Capri. At the sight of Caligula, the children immediately struck provocative sexual poses.

“Who brought these creatures to Rome?” Caligula asked testily.

“The Emperor Tiberius always liked them with him when he was in residence,” Longinus explained.

Grimacing, Caligula moved on. “I want all magistrates to be popularly elected,” he informed Longinus, returning his attention to the business of the state.

“Yes, Lord,” Longinus replied, pleased.

Caligula looked into the next room. It was occupied by the two black satyrs and the white nymph. Obviously, they had anticipated the Emperor’s arrival, for they were already vigorously engaged in their sexual performance. Looking disgusted, Caligula proceeded. “And I want all magistrates to be responsible not to me but to the law,” he informed Longinus.

“Yes, Caesar!” the senator responded delightedly.

“Abolish the auction tax,” Caligula decreed.

“Oh, yes, Caesar!”

“And we shall publish each year the imperial budget,” Caligula said, halting at the entrance to another room.

Inside, the naked hermaphrodite was reclining on a couch. Becoming aware of the Emperor, the creature leaped to its feet and, grinning sweetly, approached the doorway. Caligula slammed the door in its face.

“No more secrets,” Caligula said, moving on once more. “No more spies. No more informers.”

“Yes, yes, Caesar!”

Looking into the next room, Caligula found the children whom Tiberius had referred to as his little fishes. “Longinus,” he commanded, “get rid of these perverts.” Turning, he strode back in the direction from which he had come. “All of them,” he said, indicating the occupants of the other rooms along the way.

“But Caesar,” Longinus protested, “they are valuable slaves, a part of your inheritance.”

“Then sell them,” Caligula replied. “But get rid of them.” His final words on the subject were directed at the departed Tiberius, a denunciation. “Filthy, lecherous old goat...”

8.

Seated in the imperial box at the Palatine stadium, Caligula was making a vain attempt at concealing his boredom. Below in the arena, the imperial guards were engaged in sports—archery, swordplay, wrestling, and so on. Caligula stifled a yawn. Twisting in his seat, he looked ah distractedly, seemingly oblivious both to the efforts of the athletes and the cheering of the

spectators. What was foremost in his imperial mind was the hope—very nearly a prayer—that the games would soon end.

With Caligula in the box were Macro, Chaerea—who was responsible for the Emperor's safety—and two other senior officers. Macro's attention was fixed avidly on the activities in the arena. Chaerea, however, appeared to be having almost as much trouble as Caligula in concentrating on the games. His eyes kept shifting from Macro to the Emperor, then from the Emperor back to Macro, as if they were two suitors for his hand and he was finding it difficult to choose between them. As for the other two officers, their expressions were voids. It was the first time they had been invited into the imperial box, and their primary aim was to keep from making mistakes. Toward that end, they had made statues of themselves.

Suddenly, there was a loud clanging of swords on shields. Accompanying the din was a boisterous cry of "Hail, Caesar!" from the spectators. Realizing, gratefully, that the games at last were over, Caligula rose to acknowledge the cheers of his subjects. Then, when the cheering finally subsided, he faced the guards, who had lined up in front of the imperial box.

"To each of you," he told them, "to celebrate the beginning of our reign... ten gold pieces..."

The guards erupted in a roar of delight.

Turning away, Caligula spoke dryly to Macro. "That should keep them happy for a while," he said.

Macro agreed. "It's been years since Tiberius gave them anything," he said.

Caligula looked at him levelly, piercingly. "Are you criticizing my beloved grandfather?" he asked.

Macro stared back at him, startled. "Uh... Yes. That is, no, Caesar," he replied haltingly. Caligula kept his eyes on Macro for another moment, then, with a look of disdain, turned and led the way from the box. Macro, close at his heels, followed by the other officers, had the appearance of a man who had been notified abruptly that he had a very uncertain future.

As the imperial party proceeded, Caligula's attention was drawn to one of the guards who was standing at attention along the line of departure. The young man was uncommonly handsome, his hair a mass of golden curls. Caligula halted in front of him. The guard saluted smartly.

"I know you..." Caligula said.

"Proculus, great Caesar," the young man informed him.

Caligula nodded, recalling. "The athlete... yes..." He beamed delightedly. "Yes, I *do* remember," he said. "The swordsman."

"Whatever I am," Proculus said, "it is for Caesar."

"Yes..."

"Proculus is to be married this month," Chaerea informed Caligula. "To Livia Orestilla."

At the same moment, Macro stepped forward. "Caesar—" he began.

Caligula silenced him by ignoring him. "My compliments," he said, addressing Proculus. "Perhaps I will come to the wedding."

Proculus' eyes opened wide in pleased astonishment. "The honor would be too great..." he murmured.

"On this earth," Caligula told him serenely, "we are the judge of honor."

"Yes, Caesar," Proculus agreed.

At last, Caligula gave Macro the attention he had been seeking. "All right," he said coolly to the commander of the guard, "lead the way."

Macro saluted. Still looking gravely troubled, he moved on, trailed by the others.

Chaerea fell in beside Caligula. The two men exchanged looks. Chaerea's was an expression of submissiveness. He had made his choice. In response, Caligula smiled faintly, then reached into his tunic and extracted a document, which he handed to Chaerea, and which Chaerea accepted willingly. Without a word having been spoken, the two men had shared a vow, linking themselves in an alliance.

From the Emperor's bedroom the view was of the temple of Jupiter on Capitol Hill. Now, in the dimming light of the temple was a mere shadow against the reddening sky. To Caligula, lying with Ennia on a divan, the dark shadow was difficult to keep in focus. It seemed to be gently swaying, leaning slowly to one side, then to the other, trying to avoid his gaze. Caligula had had more than enough wine.

Ennia was not similarly bothered. She was radiant and clear-eyed and her adoring look was fixed unwaveringly on Caligula. She was also single-minded. "The divorce will only take a few days," she said, persisting with a subject that Caligula preferred not to discuss at the moment.

His answer was evasive. "How can I live that long without you?" he said woodenly, keeping his eyes on the dark shape that was the temple of Jupiter.

"We must be strong," Ennia told him, apparently unaware that his manner had become distant. "And then... we shall have all our lives together."

"A dream come true," Caligula murmured.

"And after that—all eternity!" Ennia said ecstatically, allowing her imagination to take flight.

"Oh, joy... Joy!" Caligula responded placidly. Beginning to notice that he was not matching her in enthusiasm, Ennia looked at him curiously. "We shall live here, won't we?" she asked. "In Rome."

"Wherever you like."

"I love Rome," Ennia said, sighing blissfully. "But then, I love anywhere—with you. Just as long as we're not hidden away in the country. Or on an island like Capri." She shuddered. "I do hate Capri."

"Ennia, I swear to you by— By me, by Caesar," Caligula promised, "that you will never, ever see Capri again."

Elated, Ennia threw her arms around him. "I do love you! Worship you!"

Caligula pried himself loose from her hold. "The sun's almost set," he said irritably.

"What's wrong?" Ennia asked, perplexed.

"Nothing," Caligula replied quickly, suddenly showing signs of nervousness. "I was expecting a message—" Looking out at the sky again, he said, "What about Alexandria?"

Ennia's puzzlement was compounded. "Alexandria? In Egypt?"

"I thought we might move there," Caligula said.

"But the Senate... I mean...well, this is Rome..."

"No, Ennia. I am Rome," Caligula said matter-of-factly. "And wherever I am, there... There is the Senate and the people of Rome," he said pompously.

Ennia giggled. "You do make me laugh!" she said. "The way you say that."

Chaerea and Longinus entered the room. Seeing that Ennia was barely covered, they realized that they were intruding, and, embarrassed, they began to retreat. "Forgive us, Caeasar," Longinus said.

Caligula, however, stopped them from going. As Ennia covered herself, he leaped to his feet. "Is it done?" he asked anxiously.

After a sympathetic glance at Ennia, Chaerea nodded. "He has been arrested and charged with murder," he replied to Caligula.

"Good," Caligula said, relieved. "Longinus," he said, turning to the other man, "the commission."

Longinus handed him the scroll he was carrying. Caligula, in turn, passed the scroll along to Chaerea. He informed him, "You are now commander of the imperial guard."

Ennia took in a sharp breath. "Where is Macro?" she asked, alarmed. Wrapping herself in a sheet, she rose from the divan. "Where is my husband?"

"He has been arrested," Chaerea answered, his eyes lowered. "For treason."

Ennia stared at him in shock. "But that's not possible." Her voice was tiny and pinched. She turned to Caligula. "Caesar, he worships you," she said. "He made you."

Caligula broke in on her. "Ennia, believe me... I'm even more distressed than you are," he said. "More shocked."

Ennia faced Chaerea again. "What has he done?"

But it was Caligula who answered. "Your husband Macro, on the evening of March sixteenth," he told her, "murdered my beloved grandfather Tiberius Caesar, Emperor of Rome." Feebly, Ennia shook her head, denying the charge.

"The murder was witnessed by two servants," Caligula informed her. "Both free men. Each has presented an eyewitness account." He gestured to Chaerea and Longinus, dismissing them, and they departed. "I myself," he told Ennia, "knew of the tragedy only after the fact."

"But, he—"

Caligula raised a hand, silencing her. "There is nothing that can be said to stop it," he said. "Murder is murder. Treason is treason. The punishment is death." He turned away from her, looking out toward the temple of Jupiter once more. "He will die on the cross," he said thoughtfully. "In the arena at the Palatine stadium."

"Caesar, please..." Ennia begged, beginning to sob.

But he was unmoved. "The die is cast," he told her. "The only thing we can do for Macro now is hope for a nice day for the execution. It must be terribly depressing to hang out there on a cross on a rainy day."

Reclining on the divan in his bedroom, Caligula studied his face in a small hand mirror. His sister Drusilla, seated beside him, watched him secretly, smiling amusedly. He seemed especially concerned about his hairline, making faces that wrinkled—and thus narrowed—his brow, bringing the hairline closer to his eyebrows. In other moments, he concentrated his attention on the small blemishes around his mouth, scraping at them fastidiously with a fingernail. She suspected that he was thinking about the eczema that had so mottled the face of Tiberius.

From outside the room came the Sound of heavy foot falls. A moment later a servant entered the bedroom and announced the arrival of Chaerea and Longinus. Putting the mirror aside, Caligula rose and went to the doorway and invited the two callers to enter. Stepping into the bedroom, Chaerea saluted crisply. Longinus merely smiled and nodded.

"And what is our business?" Caligula asked.

"We are still holding Macro's wife, Ennia," Longinus replied.

Caligula looked at his sister Drusilla and they shared a waggish smile. "Poor Ennia," he said, in mock sympathy. "Let her be...what?" He pondered for a moment, frowning, then brightened again. "Exiled, I think," he said. "Yes. Exiled to... to the island of Stromboli. Ennia has a passion for islands," he said maliciously.

"It will be done, Lord," Longinus said.

"What else?" Caligula asked.

"That is all, Lord."

"How simple it is to be Emperor," Caligula said, delighted. He gestured blithely to Longinus. "You may go." Bowing, Longinus departed.

"Well, Commander of the Guard," Caligula said to Chaerea, "have I done the right thing?"

"Yes, Lord. The troops hated Macro."

Caligula sighed sadly. "What a terrible thing it must be to be hated," he said. "But," he added, smiling, "what a wonderful thing to be loved." He looked closely at Chaerea. "I am loved..."

"Yes, Lord," Chaerea assured him.

Caligula gestured again. "That is all." Chaerea saluted again, then left. Caligula stretched out luxuriously on the divan once more. "Now," he told his sister, "we are safe."

She lay back beside him, smiling contentedly. "I am going to marry you," Caligula told her.

Drusilla made a face of annoyance. "You can't," she said. "We're not—"

"—Egyptians," Caligula said, breaking in. "I know. We're much more beautiful."

Retrieving the hand mirror, he inspected his face again, making an angelic expression. "We are a very beautiful people," he said. "And, as it should be, the Emperor is the most beautiful of all."

"And Rome is not Egypt," Drusilla insisted. "And stop looking at yourself like that."

"Then let's go to Egypt," Caligula said brightly. "After all, that's where Isis lived—Lives, that is."

"You are a fool."

He made a terrible face into the mirror. "Caesar cannot be a fool," he told his sister.

"Caesar is doing his best," Drusilla said. "Little Boots," she said urgently, "they'll throw you in the Tiber if you try to move the government."

Caligula saw no logic in her reasoning. "But I am the Emperor, I can do anything I like," he said. "So how—"

Drusilla was rising, irked. Shrugging, Caligula peered into the mirror again. "I'm going to find you a wife," Drusilla said, moving restlessly about the room.

Her brother shook his head emphatically. "No," he said. "You are going to be—"

But Drusilla insisted. "You are going to marry a respectable Roman lady of the senatorial class," she told him. "Then, you are going to have an heir."

"Who will kill me when he grows up," Caligula said gloomily. He put the mirror aside again. "Which reminds me," he said. "I must do something about Gemellus."

"Leave the boy alone. He's no threat."

"He's my heir," Caligula argued, getting up from the divan. "That's a threat." Then, visited by a sudden recollection, he smiled broadly. "You should have seen Uncle Claudius at the Senate," he said. "When it came time for him to make his speech—as consul—he farted." He laughed exuberantly. "Twice," he said.

Drusilla refused to be put off. "Listen," she said. "The priestesses of the Great Goddess are meeting at my house tonight. Many of them are unmarried."

"Virgins of blameless reputation?" Caligula asked, mildly interested.

"Yes. And of good family."

"And you want me to marry one of them?" Caligula asked, moving toward her.

"Yes."

He shook his head, smiling softly. "No."

"But, Little Boots—"

Caligula had taken her into his arms. For a moment, she resisted, placing her hands against his chest, trying to push him away. But he held her firmly. Then the attempt to oppose him ended, and they were kissing; tenderly at first, tempestuously as the seconds passed. In a matter of mere minutes they were returning to the divan.

9.

At least a half-hundred women of varying ages had gathered in the peristylum of Drusilla's home. In general, they were standing about in small groups, talk lug quietly and sedately. The only activity was in a far corner of the room where there was a shrine to the Great God There, in front of a small statue of the goddess, incense was burning in a large but shallow brazier. One by one, the women went to it to sprinkle fresh incense on the flames and offer a prayer.

In another corner, where the lighting was faint, stood Drusilla and Caligula. The Emperor was in disguise, wearing a stola, a woman's gown that was loosely belted at the waist, and a cloak that he had draped over his head in the manner of a hood to conceal his face. In silence, the brother and sister were observing the women individually, judging each one as a possible mate for Caligula.

"Well?" Drusilla said finally.

"When do they take their clothes off?" Caligula asked.

"Don't be disgusting!"

"I'm being practical," he protested. "How can I marry a woman who—" His attention had been drawn by a lovely blond young woman who was approaching the shrine. With eyes lowered demurely, she bowed low to the goddess, then, straightening, cast a scattering of incense on the coals. Flames flared up briefly. The sudden flash of light highlighted the healthy color in her cheeks, the clearness of her dark eyes.

"I like that," Caligula said, impressed.

"That is Livia," Drusilla responded. "She's taken. She's marrying one of your officers soon. Proculus."

Caligula seemed to wince inwardly at the mention of the handsome officer's name. "I'll send him to Spain," he suggested.

Drusilla shook her head. "You don't want Livia," she told her brother. "She's a virgin. And very boring. Not your style."

Caligula considered. "The problem of virginity is easily solved," he said. "As for being boring, though, that's not so easily handled. The only perfect solution to it is execution." He shrugged, dismissing Livia as a candidate. "I'm too soft-hearted," he said. "I couldn't possibly send her to her death."

Another woman now stood before the shrine. She was elegant, sensual-looking, appearing to be in her thirties. Gracefully, she tossed a few grains of incense onto the fire. The flames rose again, but just barely, creating a soft red glow. In the woman's eyes, Caligula saw the steamy look of lusty passion.

"That will be my wife," he said softly to his sister.

"Oh, no!" Drusilla replied, alarmed. "Not Caesonia."

"You're impossible," Caligula said crossly, turning to her. "You ask me here to find a wife. The first one I like, you say she's too boring. The second one is too— Well, what?"

"The most promiscuous woman in Rome," Drusilla answered.

"Yes..." Caligula said, interested. "Go on."

"Caesonia is divorced. She has three daughters. She is always in debt. She sleeps with everyone."

Caligula looked toward the woman again. She was leaving the shrine, moving with a lithe sensuousness that caused him to take in a quick breath.

"I want her," he said determinedly.

"But not for a wife," Drusilla said.

Caligula looked back over his shoulder in the direction of his sister's private quarters.

"Send her to me," he said. "Now."

Drusilla shook her head vigorously. "Not now. Perhaps later," she said.

"Now," Caligula insisted. "*Here*."

"But—"

Caligula cut her short with a warning look. "Such," he said, smiling caustically, "is the will of the Senate and the people of Rome." Then, leaving her, he strode purposefully toward her quarters.

A few moments later, Caligula entered his sister's bedroom. It was of moderate size and furnished simply. The most notable feature was a shrine to the goddess Isis that, from where Caligula stood at the entrance, was located against the wall on the far side of the bed. There was a small likeness of the goddess, a miniature brazier, several candles and a supply of incense.

Caligula went straight to the shrine. From the flame of a lamp, he lighted a number of the candles, then, using a candle, he kindled incense in the brazier. Fumes from the incense gave the room a musky odor. The soft glow from the fire gave a rosy cast to the atmosphere. The room was no longer merely a bedroom; it was a temple.

From the direction of the doorway came a slight sound. Turning, Caligula found that Caesonia had arrived. She stood just inside the doorway, pausing. The light from the fire was reflected in her eyes, giving Caligula the impression for a second that he was peering through two peepholes in the wall that separated the human world from the nether world and seeing the fires of hell. The idea excited him.

Then Caesonia spoke, her voice throaty and cool. "You are very convincing as a priestess, Caesar," she said, indicating the female clothing he was wearing by touching a fold of her own stola.

"So are you, Caesonia."

Facing the shrine again, Caligula sprinkled more incense on the coals. As the fire flared momentarily, he bowed low to Isis. Then, as the flames subsided, he straightened and turned and approached Caesonia. Nearing her, he slowly drew a dagger from the belt of the dress he wore. Caesonia showed no alarm whatsoever. Taking her by the hand, Caligula led her to the bed. There, gently and carefully, he arranged her in the supine position. The bed had become an altar, Caesonia the sacrifice. Looking up at him, she smiled trustingly and acquiescently. Then, in a delicate motion, Caligula slowly drew the blade of the dagger across her throat. A tiny drop of blood appeared. Kneeling, Caligula kissed the blood from the wound.

While he was still bending over her, Caesonia slipped a hand inside his stola. Caligula responded to her intimate touch with a look of exquisite pleasure. Rising from his knees, he crawled onto the bed—and onto Caesonia—and the lovemaking began. Being both in dresses, they were for a while like two women, kissing ardently and pressing their bodies together, grinding against each other, but having no way of linking physically, becoming one person, in the way of a man and a woman.

Finally, seemingly out of frustration, Caesonia began to tear at the clothing that made a female of her male bed partner. She was wild; her hands were claws. And the wildness was inciting. Infected with it, Caligula, too, became ferocious. Grunting, groaning, struggling, they rid themselves of their clothing. Then, naked, they locked themselves together in a fierce embrace. Kissing, they gnawed at each other's flesh, growling, slobbering. Joined at last, they became engaged in a sexual confrontation—thrusting violently, grunting gutturally—that was as lusty and bruising as any contest between gladiators.

Seated in the imperial box at the Palatine stadium, Caligula watched the real struggles of the gladiators in the arena below him with the same ennui as he had observed the relatively harmless games of the imperial guards on an earlier occasion. Beside him sat his sister Drusilla. To his right stood Longinus, to his left, the new commander of the imperial guard, Chaerea.

"I have never met a woman so exciting, so mysterious," Caligula said, continuing an off-and-on conversation with Drusilla.

"That's a mystery that you now share with half the men of Rome," his sister replied acidly.

"I don't care. I want her."

"You have her already," Drusilla pointed out.

Caligula glanced sideways at his sister. "I told her I would marry her," he said.

"Don't."

Caligula smiled smugly. "But only after she has given me a child," he added.

Drusilla looked at him tauntingly. "How will you ever know if it's yours?"

Caligula faced the arena again. "I shall have her well-guarded," he said.

"Then one of the guardsmen will be the father."

"Not a chance. All the guards will be castrated." He snickered, imagining Caesonia's frustration. "She'll be furious, of course."

In the arena, one of the gladiators dropped to the ground, blood spurting like a geyser from a puncture wound in his throat. The spectators cheered wildly.

Caligula made a face of utter disgust. "How I hate these filthy games," he said. "All that blood..." His expression still sour, he turned his eyes to the spectators. Their faces glowed with excitement, blood lust, as they watched the carnage in the arena.

"Animals. That's what they are," Caligula said, repelled. Abruptly, he broke into a smile. He had discovered Proculus, the handsome guardsman, among the spectators. For a moment, Caligula viewed the young man warmly, almost seductively. Then his mouth twitched, as if triggered by a tic, and his expression became cruel. With a small gesture, he summoned Longinus to his side, then whispered to him. Longinus, after a nod, retreated and spoke to a pair of guardsmen who were stationed at the rear of the box.

The guardsmen went immediately to where Proculus was seated. Without a word to him, they got hold of him by the arms and raised him up. With Proculus struggling, looking baffled, they dragged him to the barrier that separated the spectators from the combatants and swung him over the top of it and into the arena. The crowd erupted in a roar of applause. One of the guardsmen tossed his sword down to the stunned Proculus.

"But isn't that one of your officers?" Drusilla said, puzzled, to her brother.

"Yes," he replied, grinning. "This should be most amusing."

Four of the gladiators were still on their feet. One was armed with a spear, another with a trident, the third had a sword, and the fourth was gripping a dagger. Knowing what was expected

of them, they halted the battles that they were waging against each other and converged on Proculus.

Still baffled, perhaps, but no longer stunned by the predicament he found himself in, the young officer faced his four opponents with a look of gritty resolve. The gladiators, apparently thinking that he would be easy game, approached him jauntily. Their cockiness was quickly proved to be foolhardy. Instead of waiting to be set upon, Proculus initiated the action. Judging the gladiator who was armed with the dagger to be the most vulnerable, he lunged at him and drove his sword straight through the man's middle. Falling, the gladiator slid limply from the blade.

In the imperial box, Caligula looked as if he had been betrayed. The expression was fleeting, however, since he was able to console himself immediately with the knowledge that Proculus still had three experienced killers to face, and that, thus, his chance for survival was almost nil.

It was the gladiators' turn to be shaken, having seen their comrade dispatched so easily. Instinctively, they drew back from Proculus, showing respect for his ability. And, in doing so, they made their second error. Still on the offensive, Proculus lunged again, catching them by surprise once more. The gladiator with the spear found himself suddenly disarmed, his weapon shattered, lying in two pieces at his feet. He had only a second, though, to regret his now untenable position. Proculus' sword was slashing through the air again. In the next instant, the ox-spear-carrier literally lost his head.

Unfortunately for Proculus, his success in dealing with the first two gladiators made the second two realize what danger they were in and spurred them to furious action. They fought back as a team, the gladiator with the trident jabbing at Proculus keeping him erect, and the gladiator with the sword hacking at his legs, trying to cut him down from the bottom up. And, the method produced a degree of success. Before long, Proculus' face was bleeding from superficial wounds and he was beginning to have the look of a man who knew that a miracle would be required to save him.

The cheering of the spectators as they sensed the imminent killing of an officer of the imperial guard was so wildly exultant that it verged on mass madness. Their faces were twisted, their eyes bulged, their mouths were horns-of-plenty spilling out a never-ending swill of hateful obscenities.

In his box, Caligula viewed the way the battle was going and listened to the insane ravings of the spectators with immeasurable satisfaction. He had created this spectacle. And so easily, with a simple whispered command to the commander of his imperial guard. It was truly gratifying, he reflected, to be a man of such power. Indeed, what god could do more with so little effort?

Alas for the Emperor, the gratification was to be short-lived. In the arena, the gladiator with the trident made a lunge at Proculus that was intended to drive the three tines of the weapon into his head at eye-level. But Proculus dodged. And the gladiator, unable to check his forward motion, ended up with the blade of Proculus' sword imbedded in his chest. He went clumsily, like an oaf, teetering on his feet, crashing to his knees, then toppling backwards, allowing Proculus to withdraw the sword.

The Emperor became glum, shaking his head in dismay, sensing that his spectacle was doomed to ruin. He was correct. The gladiator with the sword was no match for a guardsman who had gone through rigorous training to perfect his talent with the blade. Proculus fainted a few times—a half-dozen at the most— then, catching the gladiator off-balance, chopped off his left leg at the knee. Thus handicapped, the gladiator lasted less than a minute.

The same spectators who shortly before had been shrieking for Proculus' head now cheered his victory. Standing, brandishing their fists, they acclaimed him as if he were their deliverer from some ghastly fate. If their hero heard them, however, he showed no sign of it. Awash in sweat, dirt and blood, he stumbled toward the imperial box, looking up vacantly at Caligula, still baffled, wanting to know why he had been cast into the arena.

"He was superb, wasn't he?" Drusilla said breathlessly. Caligula sighed. Grudgingly, he nodded.

Proculus was now standing before him. Cognizant of the fact that the crowd was now with Proculus, Caligula adapted himself to its mood. Rising, he overlaid his face with a radiant smile.

"For Proculus!" he announced, booming out the words. "The crown of victory!" Again, the spectators exploded in a pandemonium of cheering. Attendants were crowning the still befuddled Proculus with the laurel wreath.

"I thought he'd be killed," Caligula said petulantly.

"Why??" Drusilla asked, startled. "When he's so beautiful."

Caligula did not reply. She would not understand, he supposed, that Proculus' beauty was reason enough.

10.

The house of Proculus showed him to be a man of moderate monetary worth. It was furnished with chairs rather than the stools used by the lower classes; the tables were of the three-legged type, much prized by the proletarian; the lamps—unlighted now—were of silver, and so on. There was no ostentation. Where there was decoration—the carvings on the cups, salt cellars and bowls; the paintings on the walls; the mosaics underfoot—it was plain, simple, in the very best of taste.

In the atrium the wedding guests were gathering for the celebration that followed the ceremony. The talk was light, spirited. The tables were heaped with the choicest foods—the meat of chickens, hares, dormice and ostriches, mostly jellied; pigeon stew and mushrooms in honey; jellied peaches and fresh cheese; beef, pork, venison and wild ass marinated in vinegar and mint. Servants bustled about among the guests, filling and refilling cups with wine. To one side, whispering together, stood Proculus and Livia; Livia in the flame-colored cloak of the Roman bride, Proculus' toga trimmed in purple. As they spoke, they touched each other tentatively, as if practicing for the intimacies that were to come later. There was a rosy glow to their faces that looked almost artificial, but which, in truth, was the external manifestation of a genuine inner feeling of love for each other.

Suddenly there was a sound of commotion from outside. Horses were neighing and snorting, armor was clanking. The bride and groom and their guests paused in their conversations, looking expectantly toward the entrance. Moments later, imperial guards began appearing. The guests began whispering excitedly. Then, looking flustered, the butler took stage-center, standing squarely in the middle of the entranceway.

"Caligula Caesar," the butler announced, "Emperor of Rome!" Instantly, the guests became silent, wide-eyed. The butler stepped aside. Caligula entered. He was all smiles and good humor. Following him by a few steps was Caesonia.

"And the Lady Caesonia," Caligula said to the butler, prompting him.

"And the Lady Caesonia!" the butler announced, intoning the words as if they were an imperial declaration.

Proculus advanced a step, bowing, acknowledging Caligula's arrival. "Lord Caesar!" The guests-all bowed deeply.

"We're late," Caligula said, gesturing casually to put the bride and groom and guests at ease. "I apologize. Was the ceremony beautiful? The auguries good?" Followed again by Caesonia, he strolled on toward where the bride and groom were standing.

"Yes, Caesar," Proculus replied. "You are very... very gracious, Caesar, to come..."

Caligula offered a hand—first to Proculus, then to Livia kissing. "I had to," he told Proculus. "You are a Roman hero." Glancing back over his shoulder, he addressed Caesonia. "He killed four gladiators in one day." His eyes now rested on Livia. "What a delicious bride," he said, speaking the words as if, at the same time, he were biting into a particularly sweet and juicy fruit.

As was expected of her, Livia blushed furiously, lowering her eyes. Caligula became aware of the stilted silence. "Go on with your party," he said, gesturing once more. "I am just a guest, like any other."

The guests resumed their interrupted conversations— but stiffly, distractedly, unable to ignore the presence of the Emperor. Servants brought wines to Caligula and Caesonia, offering them choices. They made their selections, and the servants retreated a short distance, remaining ready to serve them. None of the guests dared approach the Emperor and his Lady. Sipping, Caligula looked over the rim of his wine cup, his eyes on Livia, who, with her new husband, was joining in the feasting. "She's perfect, isn't she?" he said, his voice throaty with simulated passion.

"You want her?" Caesonia asked.

"Mmmmm." It was neither a yes nor no, it was an expression of indecision.

"I thought you didn't like virgins."

"I don't think I've ever known any." His eyes suddenly glittered. Apparently he had made up his mind. "Well, should I?" he asked, turning to Caesonia.

She, too, was now excited. "You are Caesar," she reminded him.

"Yes!"

Caligula held out his wine cup. It was immediately taken by a servant. Then, smiling with exaggerated cheerful ness, he approached the bridal couple.

"Now for the procession to the bridal chamber," he announced. "And to the sacred marriage bed."

There was shocked quiet. This was an improvisation; not at all according to ritual. None, however, dared to speak out against the Emperor's tampering with tradition.

The butler led the way, leaving the atrium and moving ceremonially in the direction of the bedroom. He was followed by Proculus and Livia, then by Caligula and the other guests. At the doorway to the bedroom, Proculus and Livia paused and clasped hands, then entered. The butler started to pull the door closed behind them. But Caligula stopped him.

"I shall now bestow the special blessing of Caesar upon this happy union," he informed the guests. He stepped across the threshold. "Now," he told the butler, smiling, "you may shut the door."

The door closed.

In the bedroom, Proculus and Livia stood side by side, still holding hands, looking awkward and embarrassed. Ignoring them for the moment, Caligula glanced about the room. Noting that the bed was strewn with rose petals, he smiled amusedly. Then he focused his attention on the newlyweds once more, his expression cheerful and kindly. "I've never seen a more handsome couple," he told them.

They remained mute, apprehensive. “Now for my wedding gift,” Caligula said. He motioned to Livia. “Take off those robes, dear girl.”

She took in a sharp breath, shocked. “But... no...” she said, appealing for help to her husband.

“No?” Caligula said. His tone was cutting, his look hard. Livia gripped Proculus’ hand fiercely, looking up at him pleadingly for instructions. Avoiding her gaze, he nodded feebly, telling her that she must obey the Emperor. Caligula smiled his approval of the decision.

Looking shamed and terrified, Livia began removing her clothing. Caligula watched with great pleasure. Now and then, he glanced at Proculus to see how he was reacting. The groom was clearly furious. But, just as obviously, he had resigned himself to suffering through the indignity without protest.

Livia was now naked. Head bowed, she covered her sex with her hands.

“Very nice,” Caligula said to Proculus, his eyes on Livia. “My compliments.” He began circling her, inspecting her closely, as if she were a piece of statuary that he was considering purchasing. “Perhaps a little heavy in the hips, but...” He squeezed a thigh.

Livia started, as if she had been burned.

“Don’t move,” Caligula told her testily. He turned to Proculus again. “Is this the first time you have seen your beautiful wife—as she is?” he asked.

Proculus swallowed. “Yes, Caesar.”

Caligula addressed Livia. “Are you really a virgin?” he asked skeptically.

“Yes, Caesar,” she whispered hoarsely.

“I think I shall faint!” Caligula said, in a mocking falsetto. Then, speaking normally again, he motioned toward the bed. “On your back, my dear,” he said to Livia. “Come, come, let’s not delay.”

As she moved toward the bed, Caligula removed his robe and laid it across a chair. When he turned to her again, she had taken the position that he had ordered. Her hands were still covering her sex. Proceeding toward the bed, Caligula hiked up his tunic, exposing his genitals. From Proculus came a sharp, involuntary sound of protestation.

Caligula paused. “Yes, Proculus?”

“Nothing, Caesar,” the groom answered grimly. “What—” He could not finish the question.

“What am I going to do?” Caligula smiled tauntingly. “Watch” Kneeling on the bed, Caligula reached forward and pulled Livia’s hands away from her sex. Then, grasping her by the knees, he spread her legs wide. Livia clamped her eyes shut, refusing to look at him. Caligula studied her appraisingly again for a moment. Then, leaning slightly forward, he began caressing and feeling her body. His hands glided over and around the curves of her breasts, over and down the low mound of her belly, along the satiny softness of the insides of her thighs. She trembled at his touch; not with passion, but with fear.

“Open your eyes,” Caligula commanded. She shook her head, keeping her eyes tightly closed.

Reaching out again, Caligula placed his thumbs on her eyelids and forced them open. “Lucky girl!” he said exuberantly. “To lose your virginity to a direct descendant of the goddess Venus! Oh, what I would give to be you at this marvelous moment!” Livia shuddered.

With careful precision, Caligula inserted himself into her. Then, roughly, he thrust forward. Livia cried out in pain. But Caligula clapped a hand to her mouth, silencing her. Proculus, repulsed by the scene, turned his head away, shutting his eyes.

“Open your eyes, Proculus,” Caligula warned, “if you want to have eyes to open.”

Steeling himself, Proculus obeyed. Caligula thrust at Livia again, then again and again. He began to perspire, finding little pleasure in the procedure, but much work. With each thrust, Livia cried out again. In time, however, as the pain became less and less, the outcries subsided into mere sobs. At last, Caligula either finished or grew too weary to continue. Whatever the reason, he withdrew. Standing again, his tunic rumpled, he stood motionless, panting. On the bed, Livia curled herself tightly into the fetal position, covering her face with her hands. Watery blood trickled down a thigh.

"I'm raw," Caligula complained resentfully, touching his genitals through the tunic. "She really was a virgin," he told Proculus. He smiled suddenly, as if struck by inspiration. "Are you?" he asked Proculus.

"Me... Caesar?"

"Yes. Are you a virgin, too?"

"Well, no... Caesar."

"Isis will not like that," Caligula said. "One law for woman. One law for man. That's not fair. We shall alter that." He motioned. "Come on."

"Come on?" Proculus responded, puzzled.

"Off with your clothes," Caligula told him. "The spirit of the goddess Isis—as well as Venus—is upon me. You're in luck."

Proculus hesitated for a second, not because he was thinking about resisting, but to strengthen himself. Then he began stripping himself of his clothing. On the bed, Livia uncovered her eyes and stared at her husband in disbelief.

When Proculus was naked, Caligula took a tour of him, as earlier he had toured Livia. Standing rigidly at attention, Proculus stared straight ahead. When Caligula pinched his testicles he gasped, but he kept his body taut. Noticing the clenched tenseness of Proculus' buttocks, Caligula patted them gently, soothingly, as he might have patted the flanks of a nervous stallion.

Finished with the inspection, Caligula turned to Livia. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said, "but we'll need the bed." Horrified, she rose to her hands and knees, then retreated, leaving the bed and backing away toward a corner.

"Now, you," Caligula said to Proculus. "The same position as your wife will do nice I believe." Stoically, Proculus arranged himself on the bed on his back, his knees raised and his legs parted. Caligula then mounted him, as he had mounted Livia.

Proculus' shell of resignation began to crack. "Caesar, no," he said tightly. "Please..."

Caligula looked hurt. "Don't you love me, Proculus?" he asked teasingly.

"Yes, Caesar, but—" Livia, wedged into the corner, watching in absolute horror, was slowly sinking to the floor.

Leaning forward, Caligula entangled his fingers in Proculus' golden curls. "I particularly like your hair," he told him, his voice pulsing with a sudden ecstasy. "So thick..." He tightened his grip on the curls, until, seared by pain, Proculus began to weep.

At that same instant, Caligula thrust forward viciously.

Proculus shuddered and shrieked, as if reamed by a bolt of lightning. "You lied to me," Caligula scolded. "You're a virgin, too."

Sweat was pouring from Proculus' body. "Yes, Caesar," he replied, his voice raw. "I am...there..." Caligula thrust forward again. Proculus shuddered once more, whimpering.

"You're a lot tougher than she was..." Caligula complained.

"Don't!" Proculus cried out in agony.

Caligula was indignant. "Don't?" he said. "You say 'don't' to me?"

"I mean... yes... do... please..." Proculus replied, terrified by the Emperor's tone.

"That's better," Caligula said sweetly. "And, I'll do my best to make you happy," he assured Proculus. "Only..." He now had the look of a martyr. "...this is painful. For me." He thrust forward once more.

Tears streamed from Proculus' eyes, joining the sweat in trickling down his face.

"Say you love me, Proculus," Caligula commanded.

"I... love you... Caesar..." Proculus gasped.

"Call me Caligula."

"I... love you... Caligula..."

"And you like this,"

"Oh, yes," Proculus replied, sobbing with pain. "Yes. Yes. I love it... Caligula..."

Caligula gave his victim a final jab.

Proculus screamed, then went on the verge of losing consciousness.

"Well, I don't love it," Caligula said crossly, with drawing from Proculus. Standing, he pulled down his tunic, brushing at it angrily, attempting to remove the wrinkles. "Get up, bitch!" he said to Proculus. "You've worn me out." He turned toward Livia, who was squatting in the corner. "Your wife's insatiable," he told her.

As Caligula busied himself with retrieving his robe and putting it on, Proculus dragged himself from the bed and went to Livia. She was in shock from what she had witnessed, her eyes glassy, unfocused. Gently, Proculus raised her to her feet, then put an arm around her to steady her.

The newlyweds were standing side by side, heads bowed, when Caligula faced them again. The blood had dried on Livia's thigh, but a fresh trickle was making its way down Proculus' leg from his torn anus. Caligula smiled humorlessly at the raped couple. He was still panting from the exertion of the struggle to enter Proculus.

"See?" he said to them. "Am I not a kind and generous emperor? I have exhausted myself in order to make your wedding—" He paused, searching for the right word. "—holy," he said finally.

The bride began to weep silently. "Dear Livia, if you want to keep Proculus in love with you," Caligula advised, "mount him at regular intervals the way I did... using some cylindrical object. In that way you will be able to make him as happy as I did." His smile became sardonic. "Well, almost as happy," he added.

The only response was Livia's continued weeping. Caligula went to them. He enclosed them both in a warm embrace. "You have been truly honored today," he told them. "My blessings upon you both." Then, releasing them and turning away and going toward the doorway, he called back jauntily, "Let us join your happy families."

Leaving the bedroom, Caligula came upon Caesonia and Livia's father in conversation. "Caesar is giving the young people his special blessing," Caesonia was saying. "Your daughter must be so thrilled."

"Yes. Yes. Of course, Lady Caesonia," the father replied, rattled. Apparently he had heard the cries of agony.

11.

Accompanied by Caesonia, Caligula entered the clerks' quarters in the palace. Longinus, who had become Caligula's aide, was already there, moving among the clerks, reading over their shoulders as they prepared documents for the Emperor's signature. Becoming aware of Caligula's arrival, one of the clerks quickly got to his feet. The others, alerted, rose also.

Longinus hurried to the entrance to the room, where Caligula and Caesonia had paused, and knelt and kissed the Emperor's hand.

In a single nonchalant gesture, Caligula ordered the clerks to resume their work and Longinus to rise. "Caesonia tells me that I have been neglecting my work," he said to Longinus. "So, I report for duty."

Nodding agreement, Longinus led him to a nearby table that was stacked with papers. "These need your signature and seal, Lord."

There was a mild enthusiasm to Caligula's manner as he began putting his signature, then his seal, on the documents. "I, Caligula, command in the name of the Senate and the people of Rome..." he intoned imperially each time. Before long, however, the routine began to bore him. With each signing and sealing he sighed wearily. At last, in an attempt to revive his enthusiasm, he began to sing the oath and stamp the papers with great but obviously forced gusto. The subterfuge failed, though. Soon, the signing and sealing had become drudgery once more. His attention wandered.

"Things go too well," Caligula said, interrupting the work.

Longinus frowned perplexedly. "Too well?"

"No wars," Caligula explained. "No catastrophes. It's been ages since we've had a proper earthquake." His look became tragic. "Do you realize, Longinus, that history will forget me because nothing ever happened while I was Emperor?"

Longinus tried to reassure him. "Such a glorious and popular emperor will *never* be forgotten," he said.

Caligula turned to Caesonia. "Would you like me to conquer something?" he asked.

"You have," she told him, smiling. "My heart."

"Something besides that... precious organ," Caligula said dryly. He frowned thoughtfully. "Perhaps I should conquer Persia like Alexander the Great..."

"Don't," Caesonia pleaded, shuddering with pretended horror. "All that desert."

"What about Britain?" Caligula suggested.

She shook her head. "Too cold."

Caligula thought for a moment, then brightened slightly. "I want a bridge across the Bay of Naples," he said to Longinus.

"Yes, Lord."

"Also a ship," Caligula said. "I want a ship with a garden."

"Yes, Lord," Longinus replied automatically.

"Drusilla likes gardens," Caligula said, musing. "And she likes the sea. Oh..." he said, as if suddenly reminded of something of minor importance. Looking at Caesonia, he spoke to Longinus once more. "Arrest Proculus," he said.

"Why?" Longinus asked, taken aback.

"Treason," Caligula replied.

"Yes, Lord." The answer, unspecific as it was, appeared to have satisfied him.

Happy again, Caligula resumed the task of signing and stamping the official documents. The contentment lasted for only a few minutes, though. It was disturbed by a distant sound of thunder, a low rumbling. Caligula winced and seemed to shrink inwardly. Storms frightened him. Thunder and lightning reminded him of the din of funeral processions. As the rumble of thunder was heard once more his hands began to tremble.

In his bedroom, hiding beneath his bed, Caligula had his hands clapped flat against his ears, trying to shut out the roaring of the thunder and the sharp crackling of the lightning. His

eyes were wide with terror. Each clap of thunder or crack of lightning caused him to shake uncontrollably. Between times, he huddled, praying, murmuring incoherently.

During one of the spells of praying, his sister Drusilla and Caesonia entered the room. Expecting to find him there, but seeing no sign of him, they looked about, puzzled. So acute was Caligula's state of shock that he could neither signal to them nor speak to them to draw their attention. After a moment, fortunately, his sister spied him. Pointing him out, she spoke softly to Caesonia. Then, as Caesonia waited, Drusilla went to the bed and lowered herself to her hands and knees and peered in at her brother.

Caligula could hear the sound of her voice. The tone was tender and silky, in distinct contrast to the harshness of the thunder and lightning. Although, in his confusion, he could not make out her words, he knew that she was pleading with him to come out. He wanted Drusilla to know that his love for her was so great that, to show it, he would face even the rumbling drums and shrill pipes of the funeral procession. So, afraid and trembling, he allowed her to take his hand and draw him out from under the bed.

With an arm around him, Drusilla continued to speak soothingly. Gently, she sat him down on the edge of the bed. But then her ministrations failed. There was a resounding roar of thunder and a crash of lightning, and Caligula, terrified again, was driven to an insane frenzy. Hurling himself across the bed, he curled himself into a tight knot on the far side, covering his face with his hands, trying to recreate the darkness that had comforted him in the space below the bed. In that twisted posture, he began to shake convulsively.

A relative quiet followed the bursts of thunder and lightning. Warily, Caligula peeked out between his fingers. He saw that now both his sister and Caesonia were seated on the edge of the bed. They were speaking quietly—seeking some new tactic to use on him to dispel his fear, he supposed. Then, to his amazement, he saw them embrace; not in the manner of friends, but as lovers. Caligula spread his fingers wider, the better to observe this strange and titillating development.

They were kissing, mouth to mouth, and Drusilla, seemingly the aggressor, had slipped a hand inside Caesonia's gown and was caressing a breast. Caligula lowered his hands, staring at them openly. They were kissing excitedly, caressing each other feverishly. Pressing Caesonia down onto the bed, Drusilla opened her gown. Caligula caught a glimpse of creamy flesh. Then Drusilla's mouth was at Caesonia's breasts, lapping, gnawing.

From outside came a shattering crack of lightning. It had no more effect on Caligula than if it had been the soft snapping of a twig. His whole attention was fixed on the mouthings and grapplings of the lovers. They were both bare now, locked mouth to mouth, belly to belly in a fierce and passionate embrace. Caligula's own passion, too, was soaring. Watching them, he was fired with a great heat, an ineradicable desire to have them both, separately and together.

In a frenzy again—the frenzy now of lust, not terror—Caligula disposed of his clothing. He cast himself upon the two women, kissing them hotly, thrust himself into any crevice that happened to open to him. And they took him in, enfolding him in their arms, searing his flesh with their fiery kisses. The bed became a crucible, fired by the heat of their combined passions. They melted into each other, becoming a single body that was making the most carnal love to itself. From the sky came a crash of thunder that shook the earth. On the bed, the quake went unnoticed.

In Caligula's private dining room, his guests awaited his arrival. Drusilla was there, talking secretively with Caesonia. Longinus was on hand, in serious conversation with an aged senator. Uncle Claudius was present, his eyes on the foods that were being brought in by the

servants, drooling. The boy Gemellus, pale and nervous, was also in attendance. The dining, of course, could not begin until the host arrived.

A few moments later, the butler appeared at the door way. "Hail, Caesar!" he intoned. The guests rose from their couches.

Caligula entered. He was astride his horse.

"Hail Caesar's beautiful horse, Incitatus," Caligula said to the butler.

Unruffled, the butler obeyed. "Hail Caesar's beautiful horse, Incitatus." Pleased, Caligula dismounted. He nuzzled the horse affectionately. "You *are* beautiful," he told the steed. Then he joined his sister and Caesonia. "You, too, are beautiful," he said happily to Caesonia, patting her stomach. "Has he started?" he asked. "Are you carrying my son and heir in your womb?"

"I think so," she replied.

Caligula beamed. "You are the wisest woman in the world," he told Caesonia, kissing her. He turned to Drusilla. "You, too, are the wisest woman in the world," he informed her, grinning impishly.

"The hungriest, at least," Drusilla responded.

Caligula gestured, bidding his guests to be seated, then settled in between Caesonia and his sister on their couch.

The servants began serving the food.

Caligula glanced about, approving of what he saw. Then his eyes lighted on Gemellus, and his expression hardened.

"He's trying to kill me," he said, whispering to Drusilla.

She looked at him dubiously. "I don't believe it."

"Longinus has proof," he told her.

"What proof?"

"The boy thinks I'm poisoning him. Slowly."

"Well... are you?" Drusilla asked.

Caligula did not reply. Instead, he concentrated his attention on a selection of ripe cheeses that was being offered to him by a servant. Before he could make a choice, however, he was distracted by a loud sound of slavering coming from a nearby couch. Uncle Claudius had his face almost submerged in a bowl of jellied eels. Caligula made a face of disgust. But as he continued to observe Claudius, his expression gradually changed, becoming thoughtful.

"Should I make myself king of Rome?" Caligula asked his uncle.

Claudius, swallowing hard, nearly choked. "King? Oh, dear. I mean... well, this is a republic, isn't it? That is..."

Longinus spoke up. "You are already greater than any king, Caesar," he said.

"I know," Caligula replied. He sighed restlessly. "But I feel so... so undistinguished."

"To us you are like a god," Longinus told him.

Caligula smiled faintly, mildly pleased. "Actually, I am a god, I suppose," he said. "At least, when I'm dead I will be." He turned to the boy Gem who was occupying the next couch. "Try some of these lampreys," he suggested, as a servant offered him a selection of fish.

Gemellus looked startled and afraid.

Caligula rose. Smiling paternally, he moved to Gemellus' couch and sat down beside him. "You used to love lampreys when we were on Capri," he said. Taking a bit of fish from the tray being held by the servant, he offered it to the boy, urging him to take it.

Cautiously, Gemellus nibbled from the morsel of fish.

"What is that smell?" Caligula asked, frowning.

Gemellus drew back. "What smell, Caesar?"

Leaning toward him, Caligula sniffed. "Your breath," he said. "What have you been taking?"

"Just... medicine," Gemellus replied, flustered. "To ward off the fever. It's in the city and—"

"No, Gemellus," Caligula said grimly. "You have come to Caesar's table after swallowing an antidote for poison."

"No!" the boy protested, drawing further away from him. "No, Caesar." He looked around the room frantically. "There is Charicles," he said, pointing. "He'll tell you. It's just—"

Caligula silenced him with a malevolent glare. He then looked in the direction of Charicles, the physician, who was seated at the other side of the room. "Did you give him medicine for the fever?" he asked. His tone was threatening.

Charicles hesitated, not certain what Caligula wanted to hear. "Well, Caesar...Lord... I..."

"Did you?" Caligula demanded.

"Oh, no... No," the physician replied, lowering his eyes.

Caligula faced the boy again. "Gemellus," he said softly, his anger subsiding now that he had the evidence he sought, "to accuse your sovereign of being a poisoner is a treasonable offense... punishable by death."

Gemellus' face became ashen. "But, Caesar, I never did! I—"

"Caligula!" Drusilla suddenly snapped, scolding her brother for his oppressive behavior toward the boy.

He ignored the reprimand. "It is with sorrow," he said, addressing his guests, "that I am now obliged to follow ancient but necessary laws." He turned his eyes toward the doorway. "Guards!"

Two guards appeared.

"Arrest Gemellus," Caligula commanded. "For treason." Then, as the guards advanced on the boy, he spoke to his guests once more. "As if there could ever be an antidote against Caesar," he said matter-of-factly.

Lifting Gemellus from the couch, the two guards dragged him toward the exit. Struggling, weeping, the boy cried out to Caligula, insisting that he was innocent. The guests watched in horror. Caligula, however, appeared to have dismissed Gemellus from his thoughts completely. His expression was bland, indifferent.

Gemellus' outcries could be heard, growing fainter and fainter, as he was dragged away along the corridors. Then the sound faded out entirely.

Caligula rose from the couch on which the boy had been seated and started back toward his own couch. But suddenly Drusilla was on her feet and barring his way. She was in a rage, clenching her hands into fists, her eyes flashing.

"You stupid bloody fool!" she said irately to her brother. Caligula's own rage resurfaced. He struck Drusilla viciously across the face, knocking her to the floor. Save for Caesonia, the guests were stunned. A smile, ever so slight, crossed Caesonia's face, then was suppressed.

Staring at her brother in shock, Drusilla got to her feet again. For a second, they faced each other, both severely shaken by what had happened. Then, turning away, Drusilla fled from the room. Looking after her, Caligula winced painfully. He appeared to want to call her back. But then she was gone and the opportunity was lost.

Caligula adjusted his expression, again appearing to be indifferent. In the stunned silence, he returned to his couch. As he seated himself, the servant returned with the plate of lampreys. Caligula picked one up and popped it into his mouth.

“And they weren’t even poisoned!” he said gaily. The silence continued.

Caligula laughed. The laugh broke the tension. The guests, greatly relieved, laughed along with him. “But, of course,” Caligula added, “everyone will *say* that they were poisoned.” The laughter grew louder, as the guests showed their delight in his little joke. Abruptly, Caligula began retching.

Alarmed, the guests fell silent again. Charicles, the physician, rose from his couch and started toward Caligula. But then Caligula broke out in laughter once more. Charicles, looking sheepish, retired to his couch. And the other guests, recovering from their dismay, applauded vigorously Caligula’s dazzling display of wit.

“Well done,” Caesonia said to him, as the dining resumed.

“Thank you.”

“What will you do to her?” Caesonia asked. Caligula paused in the middle of a bite. “Her?”

“Your sister. Drusilla. What she said to you was treason.”

His look became icy. “I decide what is treason, not you,” he told her.

“Yes, Caesar,” she replied evenly, undisturbed by the sudden coldness of his manner.

Caligula, too, appeared to prefer to let the matter drop. He smiled. “Do your dance, Caesonia,” he said.

“Which dance?”

“The Asiatic one.”

Caesonia nodded, then, rising, moved toward the center of the room.

Caligula clapped his hands, drawing the attention of his guests. “Caesonia will dance for us!” he announced grandly. -

Caesonia began swaying gently, as if responding to an ethereal lilt of some inner music. From the beginning her movements were sensuous, promising something even more sybaritic, causing the guests to lose all interest in their food and watch her with eager anticipation. She coiled and writhed as if she were a female asp performing a mating ritual. So suggestive and so mesmerizing were her movements that even Uncle Claudius stopped eating to watch.

Slowly, tantalizingly, Caesonia was removing her gown. The rises of her breasts came into view, then gradually, gradually, the full, ripe breasts were exposed to the nipples. Caesonia’s expression was impassive; she appeared to have entered into a self-induced trance that had transformed her in her mind into the Asian dancer that she was imitating. The gown was now lowered to her waist. She spun dizzily in a circle, causing the skirt of her gown to flare outward. Then, halting abruptly, she released the gown, allowing it to settle, still twirling, to the floor. Her head back, her body arched, she stood naked before her audience. There was a gasp of wonder.

The music in Caesonia’s mind started up again. It was torrid music now, tempestuous, throbbing. Caesonia’s upper body quivered seductively to the sound. Caligula leaned forward and addressed his uncle. “Claudius, did you ever see such breasts?”

“Never... absolutely... Caligula... Caesar... I mean...” the old man replied, awed, spittle running down his chin.

Caesonia’s hips were in motion now, simulating the sexual act, thrusting, thrusting, thrusting, driving hard and wantonly to meet the equally punishing thrusts of an imaginary partner.

“She’s... she’s... she’s...” Uncle Claudius giggled hysterically. And then, losing control of himself, he completed the statement with a series of explosive farts.

Caligula threw himself backwards on his couch, howling with laughter.

12.

Entering the stable, Caligula paused and leaned against the door frame, resting. He was breathing laborously; his face was even more pale than usual, his eyes had a sunken look, beads of perspiration had broken out on his forehead. As he looked about, his eyes glassy, he saw the slaves who cared for the horses darting for cover. He knew why they were afraid to be seen by him. He had gained a reputation—well earned—for sending his subjects to their deaths on whim.

Panting, stumbling, continually wiping sweat from his brow, Caligula proceeded. After a moment, he reached the stall of his horse, Incitatus. Again, he rested, this time leaning against the animal shoulder and grasping its mane to keep himself on his feet. Incitatus, munching on the grain in his feed bin, seemed completely unaware of his master's presence.

"Well... the boy is dead..." Caligula told the horse, his voice thick and dry. "Poor Gemellus. Good athlete, too. But...I had to kill him." He tugged on the horse's mane. "Didn't I?"

Incitatus' only response was an idle swish of his tail. "You know that Drusilla insulted me," Caligula went on. There was a whine to his tone now. "In front of everyone. I ought to kill her, too." Beginning to cry, he kissed the horse's neck. "Strange, whether I like it or not," he continued, "history requires me to make... a golden... emptiness all around me. Except for you, Drusilla... I mean Incitatus..." Caligula mopped perspiration from his face. His hand was shaking.

"I am alone on earth," he murmured. "As I shall be in Heaven..." He whispered against the horse's shoulder. "I have the fever. Tell no one." Stumbling again, Caligula started to leave the stall. "Drusilla...I feel so strange..." he said feebly. He reached out to grab hold of the horse's mane again, but missed it and sank to the floor of the stall. "I think I must be... dying..." Then he collapsed, unconscious.

For several moments the stable was silent. Then there were rustling sounds, as the slaves began emerging from hiding. They had been watching Caligula from concealment and had seen him fall. None of them dared to go near him even now. But, after much whispering among themselves, they decided on a course of action. One of their number was sent to tell a servant what had happened.

Shortly, Longinus and Charicles arrived, accompanied by servants. After a superficial examination of Caligula, Charicles ordered the servants to carry him to his bedroom. When they reached there, they were met by Drusilla and Caesonia, who had been sent for by Longinus. Caligula was placed on his bed, his clothing was removed, he was covered with a light sheet, and then Charicles began a more thorough examination while the others stood back in the shadows, waiting anxiously.

Caligula began babbling. "Tiberius... don't... I'm not... I didn't... spare me..."

"It's the fever," Charicles announced. "It must break soon or—"

"If it doesn't?" Caesonia asked. Charicles gestured helplessly.

"Drusilla!" Caligula cried out deliriously. "Help me! Save me!" He tried to rise. "Where is my sister?" he shouted, wild-eyed.

Caesonia moved toward the bed. "She's coming," she told Caligula soothingly.

He stared at her vacantly. "Who are you?"

Drusilla now stepped in front of Caesonia. Seating herself on the edge of the bed, she placed a cool hand on her brother's brow. He sank back.

"I'm here, Little Boots," Drusilla said softly.

"I'm dying..." he moaned.

"You're not..."

"I must make my will," Caligula said, starting to sob. "Don't talk," Drusilla said. "Sleep."

"Longinus... Where is he?"

Longinus moved quickly to the bedside. "I am here, Caesar."

"My will..."

"I will summon a clerk, Lord," Longinus told him. Hurrying, he left the room.

"Dying... dying..." Caligula wept.

Drusilla looked at Charicles. "There is nothing I can do," he told her. "Either the fever will break... or it won't..."

Caesonia, standing back in the shadows once more, now seemed oddly detached from what was happening. She looked deeply preoccupied, as if she were calculating exactly how Caligula's death might alter her own life, for better or worse.

Longinus returned with the chief clerk, Acesius. They went immediately to the bedside. "Your will, Lord," Longinus said. "I have the clerk." The weeping stopped. "Herewith..." Caligula began, dictating his will. "Beloved Drusilla..." Acesius, the clerk, was scribbling the words.

"...Drusilla..." Caligula went on, his voice fading. "...all my property. I also bequeath...to her... the Roman Empire...title of Augustus..." He could barely be heard now. "...uniform I wore...in Germany...as a child ...little boots..." The lips continued to move, but the sound was gone.

Caesonia, appalled by the words of the will, stared at Drusilla stonily, hatefully.

"Yes, Ceasar?" Longinus said, leaning down to him, trying to make out what he was saying.

Suddenly, the lips were still.

Drusilla motioned the others back. "He's sleeping," she said.

But Caligula managed to speak again. "No, he's not," he murmured. His eyes opened. With a faint twitch of his fingers, he motioned to the clerk Acesius.

Tears in his eyes, the clerk fitted his pen into Caligula's grasp, then held the will so that he could sign it. The signing was slow and torturous. When, at last, his name had been put to the document, Caligula went limp again, the pen falling from his fingers.

"Don't let me die," Caligula whispered thinly to his sister.

She petted him lovingly. "Sleep, child...sleep... you're safe... here..."

"If our beloved emperor lives," Acesius, the clerk, cried out in a sudden burst of emotion, "I offer my life!"

"Thank you..." Caligula said throatily, touched. His eyes closed again.

Caligula began gasping for breath. Sweat poured out of him, threatening to turn the bed into a small pool. Alarmed, Drusilla called for Charicles. To her surprise, the physician smiled elatedly when he reached the bedside and saw what was happening.

"The fever is breaking!" Charicles announced.

Drusilla hugged her brother. "Hear that, Little Boots? You're going to live!"

There was a long moment of hesitation. Then Caligula, panting, perspiration washing down his face, smiled. His eyes rolled upward and focused on the clerk, Acesius, who had offered his own life in return for the Emperor's recovery.

"Execute him..." Caligula commanded, his voice beginning to gain strength. "I don't want to be sick again."

It was, after all, a happy time, with the Emperor returning from the brink of death. So, there were no objections to his decree. Guards were summoned and Acesius was taken away, too stunned to protest.

A considerable crowd of officials and courtiers had collected in the main hall of the palace and were milling about, conversing quietly. The apse had been closed off by a curtain. Seated to one side of it were Caligula and Drusilla; Caligula drumming his fingers nervously on the arm of his chair; Drusilla at ease, preoccupied, thinking private thoughts. Close by stood Longinus. Chaerea, commander of the imperial guard had stationed himself a few steps to the rear of the chairs occupied by Caligula and Drusilla.

"This waiting is unbearable," Caligula complained to his sister. "It isn't right for an Emperor to have to wait."

"Nature dictates these matters," she replied. "And nature doesn't know an emperor from the lowest servant." From behind the curtain came a loud scream. Caligula leaped to his feet, delighted. "Now it starts!" he said. "Do you think it's really mine?" he asked his sister.

"Positive," she assured him.

Caligula was still somewhat uncertain. "You can never be absolutely sure about those eunuchs," he said. "I mean, If they don't really cut the balls properly

Another scream came from behind the curtain, then another and another. "Caesonia is suffering," Caligula said to Drusilla. "Is that good omen or bad?"

"She may not really be suffering," Drusilla replied. "She knows that you're here. The screams may simply be for your benefit."

"True," Caligula replied, nodding, annoyed. "That's why it's so difficult to read omens. You can never be positive whether they're real or merely theater."

Another scream.

Then the curtain was pulled back and Charicles appeared from inside the apse. "The child's head has just come into view!" he announced triumphantly. Caligula ran to the apse, followed by his sister. Inside, they found Caesonia lying on her back on an altar-like bed, attended by a middle-aged woman who was acting as midwife. Caesonia was bare below the waist, her legs pulled up and spread wide. The head of the child was visible between her thighs. She was gripping the edges of the makeshift bed as if she were fearful of slipping off into some bottomless abyss.

"It's alive?" Caligula asked, peering closely at the head of the emerging child.

"Yes, Caesar," Charicles replied.

Turning from the bed, Caligula opened the curtains wide. "My lords, I am now to be married," he called out to the assembled officials and courtiers. "To Caesonia. The mother of my son... and heir." There was enthusiastic applause from the crowd.

A priest, an elderly man, stepped forward. "Where is the animal?" he asked, looking about.

"There will be no sacrifice," Caligula told him. "Get on with it."

"But there must be a sacrifice," the priest insisted. "How else will we know if the auguries are favorable or unfavorable?"

Caligula glared at him icily. "I am Caesar," he told him. "How could the auguries possibly be unfavorable?"

"Yes, Lord...of course..." the priest agreed.

Caligula took Caesonia's right hand in his own right hand. "Come, come," he said urgently to the priest. Slowly, with as much dignity as possible under the circumstances, the priest spoke the words of the marriage rite. Toward the end, Caesonia suddenly shrieked and convulsed in pain. The midwife quickly bent down to her.

"Do you vow—" the priest said, concluding the ceremony.

“Yes, yes, we both vow,” Caligula said impatiently, breaking in. “We are now married,” he decreed, waving the priest away.

At that same moment, the midwife held the baby up for all to see. “A beautiful child, Caesar!” she gushed happily.

Caligula beamed. “And a beautiful bride!” he said, leaning down to kiss Caesonia. “You are now wife, mother and Empress of Rome,” he informed her.

She could barely speak. “I am yours... forever...” she murmured. Drusilla looked closely at the baby, which was now being washed by the midwife. “It’s a girl,” she told her brother.

Caligula eyed her coldly. “It is not a girl,” he replied. “Didn’t you just hear me say—”

“Yes. I heard the voice of Caesar. But your daughter did not.” Reluctantly, Caligula examined the child. His complexion took on a slightly greenish tint.

Caesonia looked up at him fearfully.

“I should have waited, shouldn’t I?” Caligula said glumly to his sister.

She was sympathetic. “There will be other children,” she said. Caligula looked at the baby once more. He made a face of woeful resignation; there was no doubt about it—the child was unmistakably a girl. He lowered his eyes to Caesonia. “Well... well...” he said disappointedly.

Caesonia cringed, reading his mind. But then he shrugged, indicating that he intended to make the best of the unsatisfactory outcome. Once more, he looked at the baby, as if making his first effort getting used to the fact that she was a female. “The child is getting bald,” he commented sardonically. “So she must be mine.”

Caesonia smiled, sighing, relieved. Caligula turned to the officials and courtiers, who were now crowding around the apse. “Let us drink to my daughter!” he said. “To Julia Drusilla!”

A cheer arose. “In celebration of the birth of Julia Drusilla and of my marriage,” Caligula announced magnanimously, “one month of free games and a gold coin to every citizen of the city!”

The cheering was deafening.

13.

Entering Longinus’ office, where the clerks were busily preparing documents, Caligula looked exhausted. Behind him, led by a groom, came his horse, Incitatus. The horse appeared to be in fine fettle.

Longinus hurried forward to greet Caligula. “My Lord,” he said, bowing. Caligula gestured indifferently.

“Your sister’s health...” Longinus said. “Has it improved?”

“No. She is still down with the fever,” Caligula replied. “But, of course, she will recover,” he added quickly.

“Yes, Caesar. I am certain she will.”

Caligula looked in the direction of the clerks. “What have we?” he asked.

“Your new budget,” Longinus answered. “To be submitted to the Senate.”

“Yes...” Caligula said, finally showing some interest. They moved on to a table—followed by the groom and the horse—where a number of papers had been spread out for inspection. As Caligula studied the documents, he began to scowl.

“We are in deficit,” he said to Longinus. “Why?”

“Well, Caesar, your games, your spectacles, they... well, they—”

"Cost money," Caligula said. He smiled affectionately at Incitatus. "So what do we do?" he asked Longinus.

"First," Longinus responded, "we restore the wine tax."

Caligula's attention was drifting. Drawing his dagger, he took several jabs at an imaginary enemy.

"Caesar... Lord..."

"Yes?"

"First I say, we restore the wine tax. Then—"

Caligula was shaking his head. "The people won't love me if I tax their wine," he said.

"But how can we—"

"War!" Caligula told him. "Conquest! Slaves! Money!" He brandished the dagger. "Assemble the legions!" he said with a flourish. "I shall invade— Germany! Yes, that's it, I shall invade Germany! No," he said, suddenly changing his mind. "Britain! I shall invade Britain. Right after the New Year. Give the orders!"

"Yes, Lord," Longinus replied mechanically.

"If I don't do *something* fairly soon, I shall be forgotten," Caligula complained, frustrated. Angered by the prospect of that fate, he stabbed the dagger into the table. "Caligula the Dull!" he said deplorably. "I can see it now in the history books."

A slave entered carrying a model of a bridge. At the sight of it, Caligula's mood immediately lightened. "My bridge across the Bay of Naples," he said delightedly. "Good." Stepping back, he viewed the model appraisingly, his approval of it growing. Another slave appeared. This one was carrying a model of a ship that was sprouting flowers.

"The ship with the garden on the deck!" Caligula said, his pleasure compounding.

"Marvelous!" He turned to Longinus. "Isn't it marvelous?"

"Marvelous," Longinus agreed, as enthusiastic about the model as he had been about assembling the legions.

With the aid of the groom, Caligula mounted his horse. "Bring the model," he said to the slave who had arrived most recently. "I want Drusilla to see her ship."

Caligula gave Incitatus a pat on a flank and the horse set out at a slow walk, leaving the office and entering the palace corridor. The groom followed. Next came the slave who was carrying the model of the ship with the garden. As they proceeded along the corridor, Caligula reached into his tunic to draw his dagger again. He discovered, however, that he had left it sticking in the table. So he pretended that he was holding it. Riding along the corridor, he resumed the battle with the same fanciful foes he had been fighting in Longinus' office.

Reaching the entrance to his sister's quarters, Caligula dismounted and turned Incitatus over to the groom again. "Wait here until I summon you," he said to the slave who was carrying the model. Then, his expression a mixture of contentment and bemusement, he entered Drusilla's rooms.

When he got to his sister's bedroom, however, his look and manner quickly changed. Drusilla's condition had clearly degenerated. She was lying still on her bed, barely breathing, her skin as pale and translucent as alabaster. Attending her were Charicles, the physician, and two middle-aged women. At the sight of Caligula, the women turned their eyes away in pity.

"I was about to summon you, Lord, Charicles told Caligula. His tone was sorrowful. Stunned, Caligula went to the bed and stared down at his sister's stricken face. Rage rose up in him.

"Do something!" he shouted at Charicles. "Do something, damn you!"

"I am doing everything, Caesar," the physician replied fearfully. "I swear. But the fever..."

Seating himself on the edge of the bed, Caligula gathered his sister's limp body into his arms. "It's Little Boots," he told her. "Can you hear me?" There was no reaction from her; she had lost all consciousness. "Don't leave me," Caligula begged, weeping. "Not now."

She did not stir. Gently, carefully, Caligula eased her back down onto the bed. Leaving her, he went to the shrine to Isis in - the far corner of the room. There, he kneeled, tears now streaming down his face.

"Holy Isis... save her..." he pleaded. "Caesar begs you, almighty mother..." Charicles approached him, timid. "Caesar..."

Raising his head from prayer, Caligula looked at him wild-eyed. Charicles was sadly shaking his head. Caligula peered past him toward the bed. The two women were sobbing.

"She is dead..." Charicles said. For a second there was absolute silence. Then Caligula seemed to be suddenly transformed—from man to beast. Rising, he threw back his head and howled wildly, like some temporarily demented forest wolf that had lost its mate to a hunt.

The eerie shriek brought Caesonia into the room. One look at Drusilla told her what was happening. Arms out stretched, she moved toward Caligula. But he shoved her aside, spurning her sympathy, and returned to the bed. Again, he took his sister into his arms. "I'm alone. You've left me..." he babbled, hugging the dead Drusilla to his chest. "...alone... in this place...enemies... knives... poison.... Why did you? Why did you?" Abruptly, his sorrow turned to rage again. Holding his sister's body at arms' length, he shook it roughly, punishing her for deserting him.

"Lord..." Charicles protested, stepping toward him. Caligula dropped the body. Still raging, he rose from the bed and strode from the room, his face a mask of madness.

Vacant-eyed with grief, Caligula was making his way through the narrow, dirty streets of Rome's slum. He had not been shaved in several days, his tunic was soiled by oil and dirt. To conceal his identity from the rabble that inhabited the slum, his head was covered by the hood of his cloak, making him seem to be faceless. He moved in the stealthy manner of a hungry animal in search of a prey.

Caligula's attention was drawn to a group of raggedly dressed men who had collected in front of a poster that was fixed to a tavern wall. Moving quickly, he joined them. One of the men was reading from the poster, an edict issued by the Emperor.

"We, Gaius Caesar Caligula, do decree one month of public mourning for my beloved sister Drusilla."

A second man took over the reading. "During which time anyone who dines with his parents or children, any one who bathes, anyone who laughs—"

A third man spoke the final words. "—will be sentenced to death." The men were patently impressed. There was alarm and fear in their eyes.

"The rumor is that nobody knows where he is," the first man said.

"According to one report, he's gone to Egypt," the second man said.

"No. He's here, they say," the third man said. "He's still here in Rome. He's testing us."

The first man shuddered. "There'll be no laughing from me."

"And no bathing," the second man said, nodding. Convinced that there were no traitors in the group, Caligula moved on, continuing his hunt for the disloyal, the secret laughers, bathers. Soon, he came to a public bath, a perfect place to look for disobeyers of his edict. As he was

about to enter, a young man stepped out of the shadows. He was uncommonly handsome. Like Proculus, he had the look of a Greek. As his and Caligula's eyes met, they both halted.

"I'm Mnester...the actor..." the young man said. His tone was intimate. Caligula remained silent. But he spoke with his eyes, inviting the young man to join him in the bath.

Inside, they removed their clothing, handing their garments to a slave, who, for a price, would guard them against thieves. Then, naked, they entered the main room, making their way through roiling clouds of steam that were rising from the pool. Other naked men were sitting on benches or lying on pallets. The pool was unused. Two uniformed guards, swords drawn, stood at the edge of it, making sure that no one bathed. The only sounds were the murmurs of conversation and, every now and then, a splash, when a heated stone was cast into the water to fuel the steam.

Caligula and Mnester stepped into a shallow alcove and reclined on a pallet. Taking turns, they dipped their hands into a bowl of warm oil, then began smoothing the oil over each other's bodies. Caligula worked mechanically, showing little interest in the project, his thoughts on other matters. Mnester's motions, though, were caressing, intended to be inciting. Occasionally, he would lean close to Caligula and kiss the flesh that he had just oiled.

The lubricating finished, the two then began removing the oil with sharp-edged metal scrapers, Mnester ministering to Caligula, then Caligula to Mnester. And when that was done, they lay back on the pallet, Caligula supine, Mnester lying on his side, facing him. Gently, Mnester pressed his lips to Caligula's cheek, then his ear, then his throat. Unmoved, Caligula stared blankly at the ceiling. Pressing the seduction, Mnester moved a hand slowly and teasingly down Caligula's body, over his belly, inside a thigh. Caligula remained passive. Shrugging, Mnester leaned back, defeated.

After a moment, Caligula sat up. Squinting, peering through the clouds of steam, he looked suspiciously at the other men in the bath. The quietness of their conversations irked him. He was sure they were talking about him. But praising him or maligning him? Rising, he left the alcove and began walking idly among them.

"—that's funny," a man said.

"Funny... Yes," his companion replied, "but don't laugh. Soldiers are all over the place."

Caligula picked up a bit from another conversation. "He hates the Senate," the first man said. "That's why I love him," the second man replied. Caligula paused.

"He's got such pretty eyes," the first man said. "Lost money on that horse of his," the second said.

"Incitatus? Good horse, but a bit slow." "They say he's broke."

"At least he don't tax us like Tiberius. Such a pet."

"Just as long as he doesn't stop the games."

"He won't. He's a good boy."

There was a sudden commotion. A man, apparently drunk, had fallen into the pool. Instantly, the two uniformed guards pulled him from the water. Then, as the man stood wavering on his feet, in danger of falling into the pool again, one of the guards drove his sword into him. The man screamed and started to sink to the floor. But the guards caught him and dragged him away, leaving a trail of blood. Caligula was pleased. According to what he had seen so far, his sister was receiving the honor that was due her.

Mnester the actor now appeared at Caligula's side. He looked in the direction of the exit, indicating that he was leaving. Having no more business in the bath, Caligula joined him. They collected their clothing, dressed, then, red-faced from the moist heat, stepped out into the cool

night air. As they proceeded, Caligula led the way. Mnester, apparently believing that his longing was now going to be satisfied somewhere in private, followed eagerly.

Before very long, they reached the market place where the vendors were closing their stalls for the night. Soldiers were everywhere, on the lookout for laughers. All of a sudden, there was a loud, frightened squealing. A pig had got loose from its owner and was running amok, dodging the men who were trying to catch it. Caligula and Mnester halted, watching. Baskets of produce were knocked over. Men, diving for the pig, landed flat on their bellies. Laughter broke out.

Soldiers swarmed into the market, swords drawn, arresting those who were laughing—and some who were not. The pig was forgotten. In panic, the people scrambled in all directions, fleeing the soldiers. A soldier grabbed Mnester. But the actor yanked free and darted away, disappearing into the crowd. The soldier, in frustration, laid his hands on Caligula and dragged him away, taking him into custody along with those who had been guilty of disobeying his edict. Caligula's protest—his indignant insistence that he had not been laughing—went ignored.

Along with the others who had been arrested, Caligula was herded to the nearest prison. There, he and his fellow criminals were put into a cell that was already crowded with prisoners. The veterans observed the newcomers interestedly as they were flung in among them, then, when the cell door shut, they shoved them toward the outer wall, lining them up for inspection. A man who objected to being treated so high-handedly was pulled from the line and beaten to the floor. After that, the newcomers submitted docilely.

A giant brute of a man with only one eye began frisking them, taking from them anything he found that was of even minimal value, ornaments, food, jewelry. When it was Caligula's turn to be searched he held his left hand behind him, concealing the ring that identified him as a Caesar.

"Money?" the one-eyed giant demanded. Too terrified to speak, Caligula shook his head. "Food?" Again, Caligula shook his head.

The giant began patting, looking for valuables. To his obvious disgust, the search proved fruitless, and he started to move on to the next man. Then he noticed that Caligula was holding his hand behind his back. With a snarl, he grabbed Caligula's arm, twisting it. The hand emerged from hiding. Seeing the ring, the giant wrenched it from Caligula's finger.

"Well, that's pretty," he said, pleased, examining the ring closely. "Where'd you steal it, boy?" Caligula opened his mouth to speak, but fear had closed his throat and no words came out. With the look of a man who had unexpectedly come upon a bonanza, the giant went to the cell door and hammered on it and called out. "Guard!"

After a moment, the small window in the door slid open. The face of the guard appeared, and the giant passed the ring through the opening.

"Food...wine..." the one-eyed giant said. "We split the rest."

"Just like you say, lord of the monsters," the guard replied. The window slid shut. The giant turned to Caligula once more. "Well, you're a proper good thief," he said, approval in his tone.

"What else do you do?"

Caligula still could not speak.

"Shame you aren't a little prettier," the giant said, grinning "I could find a use for you."

A smaller man stepped forward. "Let me have a go at him," he said to the giant.

The giant scowled. "You're mine," he told the smaller man. "I don't share you with nobody." The small man smiled softly and breathed a small romantic sigh.

From outside the cell came a clanking sound. Then the door opened and the guard entered carrying a large tray that was piled high with food and drink, which he handed to the giant. Before the guard, on his way out, could even reach the door, the giant and his special friend, the smaller man, were squatting on the floor, gorging themselves. As the door closed once more, the others— save for Caligula—began edging in around the two diners, their expressions reflecting excruciating hungers and thirsts.

With a sudden snarl and a savage one-eyed look, the giant halted the encroachment. Intimidated, the others retreated. Satisfied that they were no longer a threat, the giant relaxed and resumed eating. A few moments later, looking up from a chicken leg, he focused his attention on Caligula again.

“Sing us a song,” he commanded. Caligula opened his mouth. A croak came out. The giant snorted derisively. “What about a dance?” he suggested.

As if in a daze, Caligula shuffled his feet, beginning the military dance that he had been taught when he was a child. The small man who was the giant’s friend began clapping his hands in rhythm to Caligula’s clumsy movements.

Suddenly, another man darted forward and snatched food from the tray. The giant, growling, grabbed at him and missed. Racing to a corner, the man who had stolen the food huddled there, ravenously stuffing meat and bread into his mouth with both hands. Caligula, afraid to stop, kept dancing.

On his feet, the giant went lumbering across the cell, cursing, bent on punishing the thief. At the same time, the other men swarmed over the tray of food that had been left unguarded. The small man, the giant’s friend, made an attempt to fight them off, but he was knocked flat, then trampled on. Clutching handfuls of food, the men dispersed, scattering themselves about the cell, shoving the food down their throats.

Raging, bull-like, the giant stormed around the cell, smashing faces, hurling bodies. In horror, Caligula cowered in a corner. Then the cell door opened and guards came pouring in, thrusting at the prisoners with their swords, driving them back against the walls. In a matter of minutes the battle had been quelled. Daring now to look around, Caligula saw bleeding faces, broken bodies. Only one of the prisoners was unable to stand on his feet, however. That was the giant’s special friend. He lay completely still on the cell floor where he had been trampled, apparently dead.

In the aftermath an officer entered the cell. He looked around speculatively, then spoke quietly to the giant. The one-eyed giant, in turn, pointed to Caligula. Looking dubious, the officer approached the corner where Caligula was huddling. He touched the hood that covered Caligula face, pulling it back, then, staring in disbelief, dropped to his knees and held out a hand. In the palm was the ring of the Caesars. Rising, Caligula took it from him. Then slowly, his eyes on the one-eyed giant, who was staring at him shock, he slipped the ring back onto his finger.

14.

The Senate chamber was jammed. No senator wanted to be absent from the session at which Caligula would make his reappearance after being missing for so many days. There were rumors that his grief over the death of his sister Drusilla had driven him mad. Few of the senators actually believed that. Still, there was the possibility that there was some truth to the story. They were anxious to see their Emperor and make a judgment of his mental state for themselves.

Longinus and Uncle Claudius stood together near the apse. Longinus looked worried. Claudius looked terrified. They were talking together secretively. Claudius seemed to be reciting

by rote, being prompted in his speech by Longinus. It was as if they were rehearsing for a play—Claudius being the actor, Longinus the coach—and Claudius was having trouble with his lines. There was a sudden flurry of activity near the entrance. The senators were crowding back, opening up a path. Then Caligula appeared, in a style that caused the senators to become mute and stare in amazement. He was seated majestically aboard a palanquin, being carried by a quartet of exceptionally muscular slaves. Caligula kept his eyes straight ahead. His manner was severe, distant.

Reaching the apse, the slaves halted and lowered the palanquin to the floor. Caligula rose regally and entered the apse, where he was greeted effusively by Longinus and Claudius. Ignoring them, he turned and faced the senators who were still silent, still stunned by the unexpected way in which he had arrived and by the icy aloofness of his demeanor.

Caligula spoke. “The period of mourning is over,” he announced in a cold monotone. There was some stirring among the senators, but otherwise no reaction. They were wary, not knowing what was expected of them, fearful of making a mistake. “The Consul Claudius has our leave to speak,” Caligula said.

Hesitantly, Claudius stepped forward. He was now clutching a document, his hands trembling. When he spoke, however, he addressed not the Senate but Caligula. “Great... uh, Divine Caesar... Emperor... Consul... beloved Caligula... it... uh... we, the fact is that... ah... all Rome is as one...uh, as one...”

“As one in its passionate desire,” Caligula said testily, prompting him.

“Yes... I was coming to that... passionate desire that like your grandfather Augustus and like...uh... your great grandfather Julius Caesar... ah... you become a god ... but *now*, that is, while you’re still alive... I mean, uh, still with us...”

The senators were dumbfounded. Caligula, through Claudius, was on the verge of declaring himself a living god. “*They* had to wait, of course...” Claudius went on, “...until they were dead...but you live, Great Caesar, and you are a god to us, equal to... uh... Jupiter and to ... uh, well, Isis...and...”

With a sudden irritated gesture, Caligula silenced his uncle. He then addressed the senators himself. “I have existed from the morning of the world,” he told them. “And I shall exist until the last star falls from the night. Although I have taken the form of Caligula, I am all men as I am no man. And so—I am a god.”

The silence continued, heavy. Caligula motioned to Claudius. “Oh!” Claudius said, taken by surprise. Then he remembered his next line. “Uh, my lords,” he said, speaking to the senators. “All hail Caligula the god!” There was a fraction of an instant of uncertainty.

Then, with one voice, the Senate responded in the way that was expected of it. “Hail, Caligula the god!” Listening to the acclamation, Caligula’s expression remained grim and hard.

“Hail, Caligula the god!”

Two men, Caligula and Longinus, and a horse, Incitatus, stood before the magnificent Temple of Jupiter at the peak of Capitol Hill. The statues of the gods that surrounded the base of the temple were being altered by workmen. The gods’ heads were being removed and replaced by the sculpted head of Caligula. The two men observed the work with intense interest. Incitatus was his usual blasé self.

“Don’t you think all the gods look a lot more sympathetic now?” Caligula commented.

“Oh, yes, Divine Caesar,” Longinus replied quickly.

Caligula glanced at him coolly. “Actually, I was speaking to Incitatus,” he said.

Longinus smiled apologetically.

The three set out along the line of statues, examining each one individually. Each time a god's head was replaced with a likeness of himself, Caligula's mood improved noticeably. By the time they reached the statue of Jupiter, which was still in the process of being altered, he was in high spirits.

"The people will want to celebrate," he said to Longinus. "We shall have a month of games."

"But, Divine Caesar—"

"And then the invasion of Britain."

"Money?" Caligula asked.

"Yes, Divine Caesar."

"Don't worry," Caligula told him. "I shall raise it by the bushel." The head of Jupiter had now been removed. Motioning the workmen away, Caligula climbed the statue and sat on the shoulders. "What do you think?" he asked Longinus.

"A great improvement, Divine Caesar. But, about the money—"

"I shall celebrate the New Year by receiving gifts from my good people," Caligula informed him. He turned his eyes toward the Temple. "I can see it now," he said. "I am the peoples' god and they will come to worship me. As they file past they will pour gold coins into my lap." He smiled as the vision became clearer in his mind. "I shall let the gold coins trickle through my fingers. There will be baskets and baskets of gold coins, all mine."

"Yes, Divine Caesar," Longinus replied woodenly. Caligula climbed down from the statue and he and Longinus and Incitatus began descending the hill, going in the general direction of the palace.

"I agree with you, though, that we are spending too much money," Caligula said. "We must find some way to reduce expenditures. Do you have any suggestions, Longinus?"

"Well, Divine Caesar, there are some unnecessary... uh ... some luxuries that are... that is..."

"Speak up, Longinus! What?"

"Your menagerie, for example," Longinus said. "It represents a considerable expense. And whether it is necessary or not—"

"My animals?" Caligula said crossly. "You want me to do without my animals?"

"Oh, no, Divine Caesar. But perhaps *fewer* animals. I was thinking—"

Caligula cut him off. "We will discuss it with my manager," he said curtly.

"Yes, Divine Caesar."

When Caligula, Longinus and Incitatus arrived at the imperial menagerie a short while later, they were met by the manager, a grizzled, middle-aged man with the permanently pained and martyred expression of an unappreciated functionary.

"We must economize," Caligula told him perfunctorily as they entered the menagerie and strolled leisurely down the corridor between the cages of lions, tigers, bears and other beasts.

"Divine Caesar," the manager replied defensively, "the animals will eat only meat. And the price of meat—"

"—is high. I know."

"Now, the men I've got working here, cleaning the cages, washing down the animals, they cost nothing to feed. So, I can't economize there. But—"

"Where do you get your workers?" Caligula asked, halting

"From the prisons, mostly."

Caligula looked thoughtful. “The prisons...” He smiled. “I think I have the solution to our problem,” he said to Longinus. Come along,” he said, turning back, heading for the exit. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before. It’s so obvious.”

From the menagerie, Caligula and Longinus—and, of course, Incitatus—went to the prison where Caligula had once been held, charged with laughing. Leaving Incitatus outside, Caligula and Longinus entered and, escorted by an officer, proceeded to the cell in which Caligula had been lodged. As before, the cell was crammed with prisoners, one of them being the one-eyed giant. After the officer had lined the men up against the walls, Caligula and Longinus stewed inside.

“The solution,” Caligula said to Longinus. He pointed to a bald-headed man. To the officer, he said, “Kill every prisoner between this one and... oh, let’s see...” He looked malevolently at the one-eyed giant. “...and that tall one there,” he said. The men who had been designated for execution began moaning, dropping to their knees, begging for mercy.

Caligula was not moved. “Isn’t that a brilliant idea?” he said to Longinus. “That way we’ll have enough meat to feed the animals for the rest of the season.”

Longinus swallowed hard. “Yes, Divine Caesar. A brilliant solution.”

“Thank you,” Caligula said modestly. He crossed the cell to where the one-eyed giant was kneeling, groaning in anguish. “Now,” he told him, “I shall watch *you* dance. With lions and tigers.”

Emerging from the prison a few minutes later, the trio—Caligula, Longinus and Incitatus—set out once more for the palace. “Brilliant as your solution is, Divine Caesar,” Longinus said, “I’m afraid it will still leave us with a deficit. There is no alternative, it seems to me, but to raise taxes.”

Caligula shook his head. “I know for certain,” he said, “that the reason the people love me so is because I do not raise their taxes.”

“Then—”

Caligula had halted. He was peering, puzzled, at a procession of senators, who, trailed by slaves, were beginning the climb up Capitol Hill to the Temple of Jupiter. “What is this?” Caligula asked.

“Oh... There is to be a sacrifice at the Temple,” Longinus explained.

Caligula brightened. “A religious sacrifice? To me?”

“Well... actually, Divine Caesar...”

Caligula’s expression hardened. “To Jupiter? How can that be? I am the god. These senators know that.”

“Old habits,” Longinus said evasively, “are difficult to break.”

“We shall see,” Caligula said grimly, setting out to follow the senators and their slaves up the incline to the crest of Capitol Hill.

When Caligula, Longinus and Incitatus reached the temple, the senators were gathered around an outdoor altar where a priest was preparing to sacrifice a bullock to Jupiter. Caligula strode to the altar. The priest, unnerved by his presence, began explaining what he intended to do: first, knock the bullock unconscious with the mallet he was holding, then slit the animal’s throat. When Caligula’s response was merely to stare at him coldly, the priest suggested that perhaps the Emperor would like to participate in the ceremony. He handed him the mallet and showed him exactly where the bullock should be struck for the blow to be most effective. Instead, Caligula brought the mallet down hard on the head of the priest. The man fell dead.

The senators looked appalled but not altogether surprised. They were becoming accustomed to the Emperor’s bizarre behavior. Looking heavenward, Caligula cupped a hand to

his ear. "Jupiter?" he said, as if hearing a voice. "Yes. What? Speak up!" The senators watched him attentively, their expressions bland, concealing their thoughts.

"No. No. I can't let you stay here," Caligula informed Jupiter, addressing the words to the sky. "I'm sorry. But I'm king of the gods now. And I need the space." He turned to the senators. "He's very upset," he told them. But then he has to do what I tell him." Again, he spoke to the sky. "Don't you, Jupiter? Because if you don't, I'll send you straight to hell."

The senators began to shift uneasily, apprehensive of what might come next. And their fear proved valid.

Caligula addressed the slaves. "There are chests of gold in the temple," he said. "Carry them to the palace." Moving quickly to obey, the slaves began filing into the temple.

"Jupiter's treasury is now mine," Caligula announced. In an aside, he spoke to Longinus. "And *you* wanted to raise taxes," he said reprimandingly.

15.

"The palace brothel is now officially open," Caligula announced grandly, leading a mob of wide-eyed men along a corridor that separated a series of small rooms. In the rooms were girls, boys, men and women, all naked. "As you can see," he said, "we've gone to great expense to bring you the finest flesh in the empire." The customers seemed delighted, as much by the setting as by the merchandise that was on display.

"Just look at her!" Caligula said, pausing at the doorway to a room in which a particularly attractive young woman was reclining on a couch. "Go on! Feel!" Several men crowded into the small room and began pawing the woman, who looked wretched.

"That's enough!" Caligula called out to the men. Immediately, they withdrew. Caligula held up a metal pot that he was carrying. "One gold piece for each turn," he told the men, rapping the pot. "And that's a bargain, because every woman here is a respectable married lady. And every girl is a virgin. Or your money back. And every boy is new to the game." He held out the pot. "Pay here. That's right; I collect the money myself."

A man stepped forward warily, offering a coin. "Into the pot," Caligula urged. There was a clanging sound as the gold piece rattled around at the bottom of the pot. The customer then disappeared into the nearest small room. Immediately, the other men began crowding around Caligula, eager to be among the palace brothel's first day's clients.

While Caligula was still collecting coins, Longinus and Chaerea appeared. They watched for a while, their expressions noncommittal. Then Longinus stepped forward and spoke to Caligula.

"There is still the business of the empire, Divine Caesar," he said.

"Ah, yes. I am a slave to your routine, Longinus," Caligula replied. He handed the pot to a servant, designating him as the brothel's cashier, then joined Longinus and Chaerea.

"We need your personal order to build invasion barges," Longinus told Caligula, as they moved along the corridor.

But Caligula had no interest in that matter. "I want to clear up my accounts," he said, changing the subject.

"Yes, Divine Caesar," Longinus replied resignedly. When they reached the office a few moments later, Longinus handed Caligula a packet of documents.

"Nothing but senators," Caligula said irritably, glancing through the papers. "Bad lot, aren't they?"

"Yes, Divine Caesar."

"Treason... treason... treason..." Caligula murmured, reading from the papers.
"...blasphemy... treason... treason... treason..."

Chaerea spoke. "Divine Caesar..." he said nervously, "a plea."

"Yes?"

"I beg you to release young Proculus," Chaerea said. "He is a fine officer. We need him for the coming war. And..."

"And *you* need him," Caligula said, smirking. "In your bed. How sweet! How romantic! And at your age!"

"No, no, Divine Caesar," Chaerea replied quickly, rattled. "It's just that—"

"Don't apologize," Caligula said smoothly. "You want him to take you in his arms again, don't you? You want him to thrust the powerful emblem of his young man hood into your old and withered flanks..."

"Oh, no, no, no!" Chaerea protested, sputtering.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes," Caligula said, mimicking him. His expression became adamant.

"Well...he dies," he told Chaerea. "I am inflexible. You know that."

"Yes... Divine Caesar..." Chaerea replies sorrowfully, lowering his eyes.

Accompanied by the executioner, an enormous man with grossly bulging muscles, Caligula stood in the doorway of the cell peering, fascinated, at the prisoner, Proculus. Proculus was chained to the wall, wearing only a breech-clout. His head hung down, he beard had grown long. He appeared to be either unconscious or asleep. In the damp ness of the cell his golden curls were limp and stringy.

"Ah, Proculus, my dear boy," Caligula said sympathetically, entering the cell. Weakly, Proculus raised his head.

"Isn't it awfully uncomfortable... being chained like that?" Caligula asked.

"Yes...Divine Caesar..." His voice was raspy, choked.

"I am told that you have a lovely child," Caligula said. "Of course, we'll never know for certain who the father is. You or—" He tapped his own chest. "Your god."

"Divine Caesar, please... I beg you..." Proculus said. "Why? Why?"

Caligula looked puzzled. "Why what?"

"Why am I here?"

"Treason," Caligula told him. "Weren't you informed?"

"But I've always been loyal to you, Divine Caesar." Caligula spoke softly. "Well, between us, there is some thing else." He stood on tiptoe, trying to speak into Proculus' ear. But he was not tall enough. "A stool!" he said sharply, addressing the executioner. Scurrying, the man obeyed, bringing a stool from the outer room. When it was in place, Caligula mounted it. He and Proculus were now on the same level.

"Your hair..." Caligula whispered into Proculus' ear.

Proculus stared at him in total bewilderment. "My hair?"

Nodding, Caligula touched a finger to his lips, indicating that the revelation was to remain a secret between them. Then, abruptly, he grabbed a lock of Proculus' hair in his fist and gave it a hard yank. Proculus yelled out in pain as the hair came free. Caligula motioned to the executioner. Drawing his dagger, the man approached.

"Slowly..." Caligula told him.

"No...don't!" Proculus cried out. "Please, Divine Caesar!" Painstakingly, the executioner made a deep incision Proculus' chest. Proculus screamed. But Caligula pressed his mouth to his lips, turning the outcry into a strangling gasp. Again, the executioner cut into Proculus.

“What does it feel like?” Caligula asked urgently, watching Proculus’ face contort with agony.

“Oh, God... don’t...”

“Make him feel that he’s dying,” Caligula said to the executioner.

“Yes, Divine Caesar.” Proculus shrieked wildly as the blade cut into him once more.

“What’s happening now?” Caligula asked him eagerly.

“Let me die... quick...” Proculus begged. With his hand, Caligula gently wiped sweat from Proculus’ brow. “No. Slowly...” he told him. Then he whispered again. “Do you think you’ve started to die yet?” he asked.

“It’s like fire...” Proculus sobbed.

“Yes. Good,” Caligula said, pleased. “That must be hell. I always knew Tiberius was wrong. There is an afterlife.” He pressed closer. “Now, when the goddess appears, I want you to tell her—”

A horrible gagging sound came from Proculus. Then suddenly he went limp, dead.

“Damn you!” Caligula raged at the executioner. “Slowly, I told you!”

The executioner fell to his knees. “Divine Caesar, forgive me! He was twisting so. I touched the heart. It was a mistake. Please! Forgive me!”

“Oh, shut up!” Caligula said savagely. He sighed disappointedly. “Lucky boy,” he said to the dead Proculus. “You got away from me.” Then, dismounting from the stool, he stepped back and viewed the bloody body. After a moment, he indicated the genitals. “Cut those off and send them to Chaerea,” he commanded the executioner. “Tell him that Proculus wanted him to have them. As a souvenir of their great love,” he explained, turning and leaving the cell.

An enormous crowd of Roman citizens had gathered outside the senate. They were there to salute the Emperor and his army, who would soon depart on the conquest of Britain. The troops were lined up, standing at attention, being inspected by their commanders. Martial music filled the air, stirring the patriotism of the Romans, soldiers and civilians alike. It helped, too, to fire the enthusiasm of the civilians that quite a number of them had prepared themselves for the send off with liberal amounts of wine.

Caligula now appeared on the steps of the senate, wearing the garb and gear of a Roman general. There was a blare of trumpets. The crowd cheered lustily. Caligula raised his arms, calling for attention. “Today,” he said, his voice powerful, “we set out for the invasion of Britain!”

The crowd roared its approval. “In the name—” Caligula smiled thinly. “—in the name of the people of Rome!”

The cheering was like thunder. Longinus and a senator, standing behind Caligula, exchanged glances, acutely aware of the fact that Caligula had failed to mention the senate. Descending the steps, Caligula raised an arm in salute to the people. They responded by shouting his name.

“Cal-ig-u-la!”

At the foot of the steps, he mounted his horse, Incitatus. The cheering continued, increasing in volume. “Cal-ig-u-la! Cal-ig-u-la! Cal-ig-ul-a!” -

“May he be victorious,” Longinus said dryly to the senator.

“May he be happy,” the senator replied.

Longinus looked at him sharply. To be happy was to be dead. The senator showed no indication that he wished to withdraw or alter the statement.

Longinus nodded. "May he be happy," he said. With Caligula and Incitatus in the lead, the army began the march. As the Emperor and his troops made their way through the city, the crowd followed, growing larger. And the blare of the trumpets became louder and more spirited. Faces were flushed with excitement. It was as if the citizens of Rome were already celebrating the magnificent victory over the Britons, counting the money and hailing the glory that the conquest would bring to the empire.

As the army neared the outskirts of the city, however, the crowd began diminishing in size. The of martial music grew faint. The cheering ceased. And by the time the army reached the Appian Way, that marvelous stone high way that linked Rome with the rest of the world, the civilians had all turned back. The task ahead was the sole responsibility of the soldiers; the civilians had better things to do.

As for Caligula, he was relieved to be rid of the crowd. Signaling the troops to a halt, he dismounted from Incitatus. Slaves assisted him out of his heavy armor. Then he stepped aboard a litter that had been brought up by other slaves. When the litter was lifted up from the ground, Caligula leaned back among the pillows. Sighing contentedly, he opened his cloak, exposing the little boots that he had worn as a child and which were now tied around his neck like a charm. He touched the boots for luck. Then, after signaling jauntily for the army to proceed, he snuggled deep into the pillows for a well-deserved nap.

16.

Although the army had been marching for days, the troops showed no sign of fatigue. The reason for that was that the march had been leisurely. Caligula had ruled out haste on the grounds that it would disturb his comfort; he did not want to be unnecessarily jostled while napping on the litter. Now, having been awakened from his mid-afternoon doze by the pleasant and bracing aroma of sea air, he had called the march to a halt.

Joining Chaerea and his other generals on a broad beach, Caligula shaded his eyes from the bright sun and peered out across the water. "So?" he said. "Where is Britain?"

"Well, It's off to the...uh...northeast..." Chaerea replied.

Frowning, Caligula pointed toward the dark shape of an off-shore island. "There?"

"No, Lord," Chaerea replied. "That's Elba. We're still in Italy."

"Italy?" Caligula scoffed. He shook his head. "No. That looks like Britain to me."

Chaerea shrugged. "Yes, Divine Caesar," he said submissively.

"Begin the invasion," Caligula commanded.

"But... there are no ships."

Caligula smiled craftily. "But," he pointed out, scanning the beach, "there *are* shells."

Chaerea stared at him blankly. "Shells, Divine Caesar?"

"*Seashells*," Caligula told him testily. "Don't be stupid. Order the army to collect sea shells. After all, we must have some proof that I conquered Britain."

"Yes, Divine Caesar."

Before long, Chaerea had the main body of his troops deployed on the beach, gathering sea shells. And, shortly after the operation got underway, he was forced to call up his reserves. Caligula had issued another order. He wanted the troops to spread out over the countryside and collect red berries. The berries, he informed Chaerea, would be the main ingredient in a red dye. When the dye was prepared, he wanted the men who had collected the berries to color their hair red.

The orders were carried out without question. And soon, vats of red dye were bubbling over fires built on the beach and soldiers were dipping their hair into the solution and coming up red-headed.

"A very good color!" Caligula said happily to Chaerea, as they stood observing.

"Yes, Divine Caesar. But, may I ask—"

"All Britons have red hair," Caligula told him. "I cannot think why." Chaerea looked as puzzled as before. "They really do look like Britons, don't they?" Caligula said, indicating the men who were dunking their heads into the vats.

Chaerea nodded mechanically.

"We shall return to Rome with one thousand British prisoners of war as proof that I conquered their island," Caligula announced triumphantly.

Chaerea's mouth dropped open in astonishment. He realized now what Caligula had in mind. He intended to pass off half of his own army as Britons, prisoners taken in battle.

"They should speak quite good British by then," Chaerea said pointedly, feeling duty-bound to inform the Emperor of at least one of the flaws in his plan.

But Caligula apparently was not aware his strategy was being questioned. "If they don't," he replied off handedly, "we feed them to the animals."

Chaerea offered no further dissent.

By then, a tent had been set up for Caligula to be his command headquarters. Accompanied by Chaerea, he went to it and looked inside, then, apparently satisfied by what he found, he emerged and settled in a chair near the entrance. As he was making himself comfortable, there was the sudden sound of approaching hoof beats. Caligula glanced at his own horse, Incitatus, grazing nearby, as if to ask him if he was expecting company. There was no need for Incitatus to respond, however. For moments later the horsemen came into view. The leader was easily identifiable as Uncle Claudius. With him were half a dozen senators.

Caligula watched them with only mild interest as they dismounted and walked toward his tent. He could see that Claudius was extremely upset. He was drooling. "You see me exhausted," Caligula told his uncle the senators when they reached him, showing no curiosity at all about what had brought them all the way from Rome. "Since last we met I have conquered Britain and subdued the tribes."

"Congratulations, Divine Caesar," Claudius replied skittishly. "No. Really. Congratulations. But, actually, we've come in the name of the Senate to tell you that a plot against you has... uh, been revealed..."

Caligula was still not interested. "I have heard rumors," he said, vexed, "that the Senate does not believe that I ever went to Britain."

"No, no, Lord," Claudius assured him.

"Well, I did conquer Britain," Caligula said petulantly. "*And I will have one-hundred thousand sea shells to prove it!*"

Startled, the senators looked at Chaerea. The General turned his eyes toward the sea. "Sea shells..." Claudius said. "Yes. Very...useful, Divine Caesar."

"I shall also bring back to Rome one thousand British prisoners," Caligula announced.

"Oh, a great victory, Caesar!" Claudius said. "Yes. Yes. A great, great victory... one thousand... uh... prisoners..."

"And every one of my prisoners has extremely red hair," Caligula told him. "But still you doubt me."

"No, Divine Caesar," Claudius insisted. "There is no doubt. No doubt at all."

"But then, you Senators have always hated me," Caligula said bitterly. "My only friends are the people. And, of course he added, "my fellow gods." He looked off in the direction of the horizon. "The gods don't live in Rome, though," he said musingly. "Very sensible of them. I wonder why I do." He suddenly frowned, facing Claudius and the Senators once more. "What was I talking about?" he asked.

"Oh— The time, the time of your return to Rome, the day of your triumph," Claudius replied. "The Senate wants to make preparations."

"Just tell the Senate that I am coming," Caligula answered. He slapped the hilt of his sword. "And this is coming, too," he said portentously. Then, his mood becoming suddenly light, he turned to a pair of slaves. "Would you be so good," he said to them, "as to throw my uncle Claudius into the Mediterranean... that is, the British Channel, I mean..."

Claudius sighed woefully. "Oh, dear..."

Almost ceremoniously, the slaves picked up Uncle Claudius and carried him to the water's edge, then gracefully hurled him into the sea. Claudius' landing was anything but elegant. He hit the water in a V-shape, bottom down. And as he sat there, soaked and sputtering, Caligula winked chummily at Incitatus and snickered.

Caligula's return to Rome was as glorious as his departure for Britain. He was at the head of the army again, this time aboard a chariot that was drawn by Incitatus. Circling his head, concealing his increasing baldness, was the laurel wreath, the symbol of victory. And jamming the streets and cheering him exultantly were the people of Rome. Even the prisoners, the red-headed Britons who were being herded along behind the Emperor's chair seemed inclined to celebrate—almost as if it were a homecoming for them, too.

The exceptions were the Senators. Standing on the steps of the Senate, waiting to greet Caligula and praise him for his magnificent deed, they had the uneasy look of men who were expecting a disaster of terrifying proportion but did not know exactly when it might occur. Being politicians, they feared any change—even a change for the better. For there was always the possibility that in the upheaval they, too, might be destroyed.

That did not stop them from playing their part, however. When the procession led by Caligula came into view, approaching the Senate, the Senators erupted in cheers that were as loud and lusty and seemingly sincere as the cheers of even the Emperor's most loyal and dedicated supporters. Tomorrow, perhaps, they would bring him down. But today their primary concern was for their own survival.

"Cal-ig-u-la! Cal-ig-u-la! Cal-ig-u-la!"

The formal dinner in celebration of the victory was held that evening in the palace dining room. On hand, accompanied by their wives, were the most important Senators. Also present were Uncle Claudius and Caesonia and Chaerea and Longinus. And, of course, Incitatus, who stood near the entrance, munching from a reed box, while the other guests lounged on couches and were served by a large crew of slaves.

"Did you see? Did you hear those crowds?" Caligula said exuberantly to Caesonia, who was reclining beside him on his couch.

"They love you, Caligula," she told him, smiling adoringly.

"There was never such a triumph!" Caligula exulted. "I am greater than Julius Caesar!" He turned to Uncle Claudius, who was occupying the next couch. "Aren't I?" he asked.

"Oh!" Claudius responded, his mouth full. "Yes. Much greater... yes... yes..."

Caligula raised his voice, addressing the entire room- full of guests. "While you senators were living safely here in Rome," he said, "your Emperor was risking his life to preserve and enlarge the empire."

There was silence. A few of the senators managed to look chastened. Other simply looked away. Fortunately, the leader of the musicians chose that moment to set his orchestra to playing. And as the music began, a group of exotic-looking female dancers, skimpily dressed, came swaying into the room, diverting Caligula's attention from his complaint about the senators.

The dancers were talented, contorting their lithe bodies in ways that were intended to arouse the sexual proclivities of the guests, especially the men. Caligula's interest in the dance soon waned, however. He devoted himself to a thirst that seemed to have become unquenchable, drinking deeply and almost continuously from a wine cup that was kept filled by a slave. By the time the dancers began winding up their act, his vision was blurring. And Caesonia was eying him with considerable concern.

"Women aren't too bad, are they?" he said to her, glancing the room, an infantile smile on his face.

"Wives of senators... respectable ladies," Caesonia replied warningly.

Caligula snorted, amused by the thought. "No such thing."

The dancers were now departing, being applauded by the guests. The musicians continued to play softly.

Unsteadily, Caligula got to his feet. All eyes focused on him, wary. Then, lurching occasionally, he began making the rounds of the couches, appraising the women. Every once in a while he would touch a breast, examining it for firmness, or feel a thigh, testing for suppleness. He was no longer being watched. Those guests who were not receiving his attention at the moment continued to eat and chat, pretending not to see what was going on.

Caligula at last came to a decision. Choosing an especially attractive young woman, he pulled her to her feet. The young woman made no overt attempt to resist, fearful of what might happen to her and her family if she did.

"Let's see how lucky your husband is," Caligula said to her, smiling giddily. He turned his eyes to the Senator who was her mate. "You don't mind?" he said.

Frightened, the young man shook his head. "No, Divine Caesar."

Towing the young woman along behind him, Caligula returned to his own couch. There, he motioned Caesonia away, then settled the young woman in her place. When she was supine, he casually ripped open her gown. Then, as matter of-factly as if he were stepping into a wading pool, he raised his tunic, exposing his genitals, and climbed onto the couch and mounted her. Blithely, ignoring the young woman's look of revulsion and the shocked stares of the guests, he proceeded to take her in intercourse.

Caesonia, alarmed, whispered to a slave, who then hurried from the room. Moments later, the dancers returned. Immediately, the musicians struck up a lively tune. The dancers began whirling dizzily about the room. Politely, the guests turned their attention to the entertainment once more. The affair on the couch, after all, was the Emperor's private matter.

Finally finished with the young woman, Caligula rose. He showed no sign of having enjoyed the experience. He looked, in fact, as if it had already passed from his mind. Then, still having a bit of trouble with his balance, he pulled her up and set out with her to take her back to where he had found her. Reaching her husband's couch, he deposited her beside him.

"Hairy nipples," Caligula said to the man. He shuddered in disgust. "How can you stand them?" Then, to the young woman, he suggested, "Try hot walnuts." He made revolving motions

in the vicinity of his own breasts. “Best depilatory there is,” he advised the young woman helpfully. The young woman was suddenly aghast, furious. The rape she could forgive, evidently, but an aspersion on her breasts was unpardonable.

Dismissing her anger with an indifferent gesture, Caligula turned and headed back in the direction of his own couch. Along the way, however, he began having increasing difficulty in staying on his feet. So, pausing to regain his equilibrium, he settled to rest on a couch that held a pair of senators. And, studying them, first one, then the other, he discovered that they were not merely senators, but important senators—consuls.

“A glorious triumph, Divine Caesar,” the consul on Caligula’s right said, beaming.

“Thank you,” Caligula replied, wondering vaguely if the man was referring to the recent taking of the young woman or the conquest of Britain.

“Even greater than your father’s,” the other consul said. “Greater even than your grandfather’s.”

“Well, they were not living gods like me,” Caligula pointed out. “Poor devils.” Then abruptly he broke out in laughter.

“What is so amusing, Divine Caesar?” the first consul asked curiously.

“Just a thought,” Caligula replied, snickering.

“What thought, Divine Caesar?”

Caligula looked from one to the other again, then revealed what had so amused him. “All I have to do is nod my head and both your throats will be cut,” he told them. “Right here at dinner.” He grinned widely, enjoying the joke for the second time. Stunned, the consuls drew back from him.

Still smiling, feeling that he was able to proceed now, Caligula got up and continued on his way. Moments later, he reached his own couch and settled down with Caesonia once more.

“*You* are making yourself hated,” Caesonia whispered to him, concerned.

Caligula shrugged. “Let them hate me, so long as they fear me,” he said. “Tiberius told me that.” He looked wearily about the room, bored. “I want to go to Egypt,” he said.

“You can’t.”

“I can. I can do anything.” He brightened slightly. “I shall make Alexandria the capital.”

Caesonia decided that it would be wise to change the subject. “What did you say to those two Consuls?” she asked.

“I told them how easy it would be for me—”

“—to cut their throats?”

Caligula looked at her in surprise. “How did you know that?” Then he sighed drearily. “I know,” he said. “It’s Rome. It’s making me monotonous. I probably say the same things over and over and over again.”

“They are Consuls, important men,” Caesonia warned him.

Caligula snorted scornfully. “Claudius is a Consul,” he said, “and he’s a half-wit.” He leaned slightly forward and addressed his uncle, who was on the next couch. “Aren’t you, Claudius?”

“Aren’t I what?” Claudius inquired, chewing on a chick en bone.

“A half-wit.”

“Oh, yes,” Claudius agreed readily, nodding. “Yes! I should think so.” He frowned thoughtfully. “Half of me thinks so, anyway,” he said. Then, delighted by his own joke, he broke out in a hysterical fit of laughter. The other guests fell silent, peering at Uncle Claudius.

“Shut up,” Caligula said disdainfully to his uncle. Instantly, Claudius became mute.

“When is the next Consular election?” Caligula asked, taking advantage of the pause in the guests’ conversations.

It was Longinus who replied. “In two weeks, Divine Caesar.”

“Then, in two weeks,” Caligula announced, “I shall select as Consul the most worthy of all Roman subjects.” He smiled enigmatically.

For several moments, the silence continued, hanging heavy in the air. Then, when it was deduced that Caligula had no more to say, the guests resumed their conversations. They kept their voices low now, though. And when there was occasional laughter it was dry and bitter. The celebration, it seemed, had become a rehearsal, a first run-through, for a requiem.

17.

The apprehension that the senators had felt when Caligula announced that he would “select as Consul the most worthy of all Roman subjects” proved valid. On the day of the Consular election, Caligula appeared on the steps of the Senate accompanied by his horse, Incitatus. And the horse was garbed as a Consul, draped in a toga with purple trim.

The crowd of citizens that gathered in front of the Senate to learn the outcome of the election was in an amiable mood. Although, for the most part, they kept straight faces, the gleam in their eyes indicated that they were amused by what was obviously going to be an affront to the Senate by the Emperor. As for the Senators, they stood concealed inside the entrance to the Senate house, looking out, their faces rigid with suppressed fury.

There was near-veneration in Caligula’s tone when he addressed the crowd. “All hail, Incitatus! Consul designate of Rome!”

The citizens cheered wildly. “In-ci-ta-tus!” Caligula raised his arms, calling for order.

“The new Consul will now address the Senate,” he announced when there was quiet. Then, with great dignity, he led the horse into the chamber. Again, the people cheered, half in good-natured laughter, half in revenge against the pomposity and hypocrisy of the Senate.

At the reins of a chariot drawn by Incitatus, Caligula led a strange procession down the center of Rome’s celebrated highway, the Appian Way. Behind the chariot was a long line of senators on foot, huffing and puffing under the sun, trying to keep pace with the horse’s brisk trot. Beside Caligula in the chariot was Longinus, who, while struggling to keep his balance, was taking notes on the Emperor’s random pronouncements.

The purpose of the procession had not been revealed to the senators. They had simply been called into session and ordered to follow Caligula while the business of the empire from the chariot. Fearful of losing their lives if they demurred—since the army was still loyal to the Emperor—they obeyed. And now many of them were paying a heavy price for their timidity, dropping of heatstroke and dying.

“I now draw the sword that I have forged in my midnight study,” Caligula announced grandiloquently, brandishing an imaginary saber. “Longinus, eliminate all taxes within the city!”

“No more taxes...” Longinus murmured, writing while teetering precariously.

“To make up for this lost revenue to our treasury,” Caligula continued, “we shall confiscate the entire estate of anyone found guilty of treason.”

Longinus made note. Looking back over his shoulder, Caligula saw another senator stagger, then drop to the ground. “Senator Piso!” he said elatedly. “He’s lying down. He’s failed me. He’s failed Rome. Treason!”

“Yes, Divine Caesar,” Longinus replied, writing.

Another senator fell. "There goes Senator Aponius!" Caligula said to Longinus. "Treason!"

"Aponius..." Longinus responded, listing the name.

"More!" Caligula cried out ecstatically. "Senator Galba. . .Senator Narcellus.. ." On and on went the naming of the fallen and thus treasonous senators.

Arriving back at the palace, Caligula was jubilant with the accomplishments of the day. He went striding straight to Caesonia quarters and then bursting into her bedroom—where he found her napping. "Wake up!" he urged, shaking her.

Slowly, Caesonia opened her eyes. She stretched seductively, opening her arms to Caligula, ready for lovemaking. But Caligula was much too excited about his successes. "While you were napping, I did some very good business," he told her proudly.

Caesonia was leery. "What?"

"Senators!" Caligula said. "Guilty of treason!"

"Oh, my god!" Caesonia replied, stunned.

"And their combined estates, which I will inherit," Caligula went on, "will come to—" There was a knock at the door. "Who is it?" Caligula called out testily.

The door opened and Mnester, the actor, appeared. Caligula immediately broke into a broad smile of welcome. "Lord, you sent for me?" Mnester said.

"Indeed I did," Caligula replied. He turned to Caesonia. "This is Mnester," he informed her. "He's an actor. We're going to put on a drama. Mnester will direct us."

"Who is going to put on a drama?" Caesonia asked perplexedly.

"You and I and Mnester," Caligula replied. "You and I will play Isis and Osiris."

Caesonia looked speculatively at Mnester. "I met him when I was roaming the city in disguise," Caligula told her. "Isn't he handsome?" He addressed the actor again. "Show us your beautiful body," he commanded. Delighted by the invitation, Mnester immediately stripped himself of his clothing. His body was lean and lithe.

"Well?" Caligula said to Caesonia.

"Beautiful..." she agreed, but without much enthusiasm.

"He had no idea who I was when we met," Caligula told her. "At least, I don't think he did."

"I never knew, Divine Caesar," Mnester assured him.

"You see?" Caligula said, elated, still addressing Caesonia. "I was loved for myself. For the first time."

"That's not true," Caesonia replied. "I loved—"

"You've loved every man in Rome," Caligula said. "And quite a few women, too."

"But my love for you—"

Caligula interrupted her again, this time with a sudden clap of his hands and a brilliant smile that indicated that he had been struck by inspiration. Going to the bed, he pulled Caesonia to her feet and quickly relieved her of her gown, leaving her nude. That done, he removed his own clothing. The three of them, Caligula, Mnester and Caesonia, now stood naked.

"What better proof that I am god!" Caligula said exultantly. He put an arm around Mnester. "I have a husband." The other arm encircled Caesonia. "And I have a wife. I am all that is... and will ever be."

It was a situation, of course, that had to be played out to the end. Taking the role of the stage manager, Caligula arranged Caesonia on the bed on her hands and knees, then got into position behind her. When he was ready to enter her, he motioned Mnester to the bed and directed him to mount him from the rear. At Caligula's command the intercourse began. The

three were soon having a splendid time of it. And the fact that they worked so well together in tandem was further evidence to Caligula that he was without question divine. Other wise, the rhythm could not possibly have been so perfect.

Later, though, in the night, when ester had gone, Caligula began to have doubts once more about his divinity. Lying in his bed, with Caesonia at his side, he tossed and turned. The nightmare threatened to take for in his mind. To evade it, he rose silently from the bed, being careful not to wake Caesonia, and dressed and left the bedroom and walked. Leaving the palace, he made his way to the stadium and entered the imperial box. There, he stared forlornly at the pale moon in the dark sky.

Made wretched by his tortured thoughts, Caligula raised his arms beseechingly to the moon. "Tell me," he begged, "is Drusilla there?" He paused, listening. But there was no response. "If you let me have her back," he told the moon, "I'll build you a temple larger than... larger than..." The futility of his act overwhelmed him. His arms dropped to his sides. "You never answer," he lamented. "You don't exist."

From behind him came a sound of movement. Caligula quickly turned. Caesonia stepped out of the shadows. "I was worried," she said. "I thought you were asleep."

"I couldn't sleep...not with you so restless." Caligula looked up at the moon again. "I hate the night," he said.

Caesonia touched his arm. "I can make you sleep..." she said.

"No. I need a clear head for the rehearsal tomorrow." He turned his eyes to her. "Will you know your part?"

She nodded confidently. "I feel I am the goddess Isis," she said.

"And I am Osiris." He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I shall be cut into pieces, and then you find them and I—" The notion disturbed him. "I must get away from here," he said edgily.

"Alexandria?" Caesonia suggested.

"Mmmmmmm." He sighed resignedly. "Give me your drugs," he said. "I must sleep."

Together, they returned to the palace, then to the bedroom. Caesonia prepared a cup of wine for Caligula, which, with his concurrence, she drugged. Seated, he sipped it slowly. Each sip made him drowsier. His eyelids became heavy.

"I shall be Pharaoh of Egypt," he said, the words slurred. "Lord of the Nile. Lord of Asia. Lord of China..."

Caesonia caressed him enticingly. But he pushed her away. "I can't..." he told her wearily.

"But you are a god."

A moistness came to his eyes. "There are no gods," he said. "Except the ones I invent." He touched his head. "Up here."

"Did you invent yourself?"

He nodded. "And you," he said. "And everyone else." His eyes closed. "Now... You don't exist. Any of you." Slowly, his eyes opened again. He managed a faint smile. "Now, you're all alive again...thanks to me..." The smile faded, the face became drawn. "I watch men die... all the time..." Caligula murmured. "They just...go..."

"Where?" Caesonia whispered.

"Nowhere." Then his eyes closed once more and he went limp, at peace at last—for the moment, anyway.

Standing at the rear of the imperial box at the stadium, Chaerea and one of his junior officers, Sabinus, had an unobstructed view of the arena. There were no other spectators. For the action taking place in the arena was not a circus nor gladiatorial combat but merely a rehearsal for a drama: the passion play of Isis and Osiris, starring Caligula and Caesonia and directed by Mnester.

At the moment, a crew of carpenters was dominating the stage that had been erected in the center of the arena, putting up scenery that depicted an Egyptian landscape, adding Egyptian symbols—sun symbols, death symbols, and so on. Extra actors were milling about, making the work of the carpenters more difficult. The starring actors, Caligula and Caesonia were standing at one corner of the state, conferring with Mnester. Caesonia wore the gown and elaborate headdress of the goddess Isis. Caligula was made up to represent Osiris in death. He had been painted a ghastly gray color and, in addition to his usual tunic, was wearing a crown and faint whiskers.

“As he goes to dinner...” Chaerea said ominously, shifting his eyes in the direction of the stage to indicate that he was referring to Caligula.

The younger man was jittery. “But when is that?”

“Soon,” Chaerea replied. The two officers left the box and, walking in silence, descended to the tunnel that connected the stadium with the palace. Moving on, proceeding in the direction of the arena, they passed a number of armed guards.

Sabinus whispered to Chaerea. “Are they with us?” Chaerea nodded grimly. “You will ask him the pass word,” he said, “then—”

“I know, I know,” Sabinus said quickly, interrupting, preferring not to hear the words. A few moments later, Chaerea and Sabinus emerged from the dimness of the tunnel into the bright sunlight of the arena. Mnester was now directing his principal actors through a walk-through of their roles.

“Divine Caesar, please, stand over there...” he said, pointing. “...on the left.” Caligula concealed himself behind a tall papier-mâché obelisk, then peeked out. “This is where I come back to life again, isn’t it?” he asked.

It was Caesonia, amused, who answered. “Yes. I’ve finally collected all your pieces,” she said, holding up a basket of false arms and legs, “and put you back together.”

“Yes, yes Mnester said impatiently. “Your speech, Isis,” he said to Caesonia.

She posed dramatically, then spoke. “Long have I wandered in the land of men, far from Heaven and my love of the sun...”

As the soliloquy continued, a nurse and Caligula’s and Caesonia’s child, Julia, appeared from the tunnel. Sighting them, Caligula smiled affectionately at his daughter, now nearly four years old and already showing signs of becoming a beauty. Continuing to watch the nurse and the child as they approached, he let his attention drift from the matter at hand, the rehearsal.

Then Mnester was prompting him. “Now you, Divine Caesar. Your speech.”

But Caligula’s interest had wandered along with his attention. “No,” he said, taking off the crown and tossing it aside. “Here’s the child. Time to eat.” Mnester shrugged amiably, deferring to the Emperor’s changed mood.

Still wearing the chin whiskers, Caligula hopped down from the stage and went to where the nurse and child were waiting. Picking Julia up, he hugged her adoringly. She giggled as the beard tickled her. “That looks funny,” Julia told her father, laughing.

Scowling darkly, Caligula pretended to be outraged by her irreverence. “Funny! I am Osiris, God of the Dead, Lord of Lower-and-something-or-other-Egypt! I *never* look funny!”

The sham did not fool her, of course. It only made her laugh all the more. And, in a final show of playful insolence, she yanked off the false chin whiskers. Caligula’s scowl cracked and he too broke out in delighted laughter.

They were joined a few moments later by Caesonia and Mnester, then the whole party set off toward the tunnel that led to the palace.

As they neared the entrance to the passageway, a company of young male dancers came bounding from the opening, followed by their dancing master, an effete-looking elderly man.

“The dancers from Troy, Divine Caesar,” the dancing master told Caligula, bowing obsequiously.

“Troy Oh, yes...” Caligula responded, pausing, eying the young men interestedly. “Are they ready now?”

“No, Divine Caesar. The chief boy is ill.”

That bit of information put a quick end to Caligula’s interest in the lithe-limbed young men. He waved them and the dancing master on, then, again accompanied by his wife and child and the nurse and Mnester, continued on his way.

“Do you know any Trojan dances?” Caligula asked Mnester, who was walking beside him.

“I know the war dance of Hector,” Mnester replied. He performed a few quick military steps.

“Ah, a war dance,” Caligula said, smiling faintly. “Like this?” he asked, imitating the movements that Mnester had made.

“A longer step to the side...” the actor replied, demonstrating.

Suddenly, the young officer, Sabinus, was barring the way. “The password,” he said nervously to Caligula.

“What?” Caligula responded, surprised. “Oh. Cock...” he said. Then, “...and balls,” he added crustily.

There was the sound of a sword being drawn from its scabbard.

Chaerea was now at Caligula’s back, sword in hand. “So be it!” he said, raising the blade to strike Caligula—just as Caligula, attracted by the sound, turned and faced him. The sword came down against the side of Caligula’s head, slicing into his jaw.

Caesonia screamed and snatched up her child. Caligula was stunned but still standing. With blood gushing from his wound, he stared in confusion at his attacker.

Mnester was now racing along the passageway, ignored by the guards, escaping. Caesonia pressed back against the wall of the tunnel, protecting Julia with her arms. The nurse had fainted, falling to the ground.

Again, Chaerea raised his sword. Caligula, however, no longer confused, ducked under the arc of the descending sword and went racing through the tunnel in the direction of the palace. Immediately, Sabinus set out in pursuit.

As Caligula fled, one of the guards tore the child from Caesonia’s arms. When, shrieking, she grabbed out for Julia, the guard’s sword sank into her middle. She died instantly, in mid scream.

The guard, grasping the child by the ankles, swung her around once, then smashed her head against the wall.

Further along in the tunnel, Sabinus caught up with Caligula. He drove his sword into the Emperor’s back. Caligula stumbled, but managed to keep his balance. As Sabinus withdrew his

sword, Caligula leaned back against the wall, bracing himself. Panting, he stared in shock at the young officer. Then, suddenly looking triumphant, he grinned widely.

"I live!" he told Sabinus.

Sabinus drove his sword into the Emperor's chest.

Beginning to sink to the ground, Caligula mocked his attacker. "I still live!" he shouted.

Chaerea arrived. Viciously, he slashed at Caligula's crotch.

Howling in pain, Caligula dropped to his knees. "I... still...live..." he gasped. Then he was on the floor of the tunnel, dead. At a signal from Chaerea, the guards swarmed around the body of the dead emperor and began hacking at it furiously with their swords, as if fearing that the spirit had not yet been killed.

It was a dark day, so drear and eerie that it had the appearance of having been lifted intact from some tortured soul's horrible nightmare. A gray mist nearly obscured the cone-shaped outline of the Mausoleum of Augustus. Adding to the illusion of unearthliness were the sounds: the chanting and keening of the mourners, the clanging of the cymbals, the croaking of the horns, the squealing of the pipes. Even the glow from the hand-held torches looked surreal, appearing to be enormous disembodied fireflies dancing in the dimness.

On the dais stood the Emperor Claudius, flanked by his closest advisor, Longinus, and his military aide, Sabinus. Claudius had a somewhat dazed expression, as if he had not yet grasped the full import of what had happened to him: his sudden rise to imperial stature. Every once in a while his gaze shifted nervously. There was a slight trembling to his hands.

Now, the masked figures of the house of Caesar began to appear.

"The goddess Venus," the priest intoned.

Claudius appeared to relax a bit.

"Julius Caesar. Now a god."

Claudius studied the mask, which showed the greatest Caesar of them all in the moment of his most excruciating agony, at the instant of his assassination.

"Augustus Caesar. Now a god." The mask was of a very old man who had died a natural and peaceful death.

"Germanicus." Poor Germanicus, Claudius thought. He had deserved better than death by poisoning.

"Tiberius Caesar." The face was marked with the scars of eczema, the eyes insane.

"Caligula Caesar."

From the spectators came jeering.

Claudius tensed, staring rigidly at the death mask of his predecessor. The lips were drawn back, baring the teeth, as if Caligula were howling with laughter. He seemed to be crying out in defiance: "I still live!"

Then a calm came over Claudius. Caligula was not actually alive, he realized. His claim to be still living, as impressed by his death mask, was pure theater— and not in the least surprising, in view of the fact that at the time of his death it had been a good while since Caligula had last been in touch with reality. So, Claudius straightened. His jaw line firmed. His look of uncertainty was gone. He had accepted his role: he was now the Emperor Claudius.

The procession of masked figures, having passed the dais, now marched on into the dimness, no longer appearing to represent Caesars of the past, but seeming to be on their way into the future to be reborn as tyrants to come.

THE END